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October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017



**Mike Davidow**  
**PEOPLE'S THEATER:**  
**FROM THE BOX**  
**OFFICE**  
**TO THE STAGE**



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**Progress Publishers**  
**Moscow**

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Designed by Igor Kravtsov

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Народный театр от кассы до сцены

На английском языке

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First Printing 1977

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Printed in the Union  
of Soviet Socialist Republics

Д 80105—333 112—77.  
014(01)—77

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#### DEDICATION

*To Gail—without whose inspiring work  
this book would have not been possible—  
And to my mother and father who opened  
the door to me to Russian and Soviet  
culture.*

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Victor Komissarzhevsky, Merited Art  
Worker of the R.S.F.S.R.,  
Vice-President of the Theatrical As-  
sociation of the Union of Soviet Friend-  
ship Societies

I walk along the street which bears the name of my teacher, the famous Russian actor Khmelyov, and it does not surprise me a bit that it's Khmelyov Street. It's natural, that's how it ought to be, he deserves the honor.

I walk along streets named after our great actors and actresses—Yermolova, Nemirovich-Danchenko, Moskvina, Kachalov, Shchukin. . . . And, to be quite honest, I take it for granted and don't give it a thought. Other matters occupy my mind at the moment. As for the names of the streets, I don't think about them at all. I'm used to them. Now, Mike Davidow, a "kind man (or rather well-disposed) man from the United States", walks down Nezhdanova Street and marvels: "Look, what a good street, and it's named after an actress. It's wonderful!" And he went and wrote about it in his book.

I know only one other man who was surprised and even embarrassed when he learnt that a street has been named after a great Russian actor and producer. This man was Stanislavsky. When, on his seventieth birthday, he was informed that by decision of the Moscow Soviet (that is, the

collective mayor of the city) Leontyevsky Pereulok where his house stood was to be renamed Stanislavsky Street, he was quite upset. "It's very awkward, really," he said. "You know, Leontyev was my uncle."

Anyway, Mike Davidow, the author of *People's Theater: From the Box Office to the Stage*, has given me back the happy faculty for marvelling and noticing things I'd long taken for granted.

Every person exists in three dimensions, as it were. The first is what he is, objectively; the second—what he himself thinks he is like; and the third—what others think of him (something he does not always know). By others I mean both friends and enemies. It's good for a person to know what his friends think of him, especially if they are discriminating and might tell him the truth and not resort to flattery. The theater also needs friends that would speak the truth about it.

I think the author of the present book belongs to this very category of friends who are both discriminating and truthful. He says that when he started studying our theater he fell in love with it. However, this love did not make him blind. It did not impair his vision and it left him with an open mind. Mike Davidow is not a historian of the theater. And, not being a historian he has the right to be mistaken on points concerning the history of Soviet theater.

For example, the Moscow Art Theater is not "the mother of Russian and Soviet theater", as he writes, quoting Oleg Yefremov. It all began somewhat differently. First there were the buffoons. They wandered the roads of Russia with their trained bears and gave shows in which the tsar himself was made mock of. The tsars did not like it, of course. And so Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, who reigned more than three hundred years ago, banned these "impious shows" and ordered the buffoons to be beaten mercilessly.

Strange as it may seem, the tsar was, for all that, a passionate theater-goer, and had the first-ever "amusement

chamber" built in Moscow, where, together with his family and suite, he would watch a show on a biblical theme for ten hours without a break. And so Bob Wilson, well known for his novel experiments in improvising "happenings" that go on for hours at a stretch, was not the first discoverer in this field. True, Bob Wilson invites everybody, while the tsar only admitted a chosen few to his shows.

The public theater, that is a privately owned theater which admitted the general public, received the right to existence in Russia in 1750, and the first theater was opened in Yaroslavl by one of its local merchants, Fyodor Volkov, the first Russian professional actor, the "father of the Russian theater".

Less than a hundred years later, the Maly Theater was opened in Moscow. The titans of our stage—Shchepkin, Mochalov, Yermolova, Sadovsky and Lensky—inspired by the desire to see their people happy and free, played there. They brought the Russian Melpomene down to earth from her classical heights, and she burst into truthful, natural, sincere and passionate speech. Later, the amateur of true genius, Konstantin Alexeyev-Stanislavsky, came to this theater as a spectator. He watched the great actors and actresses, tried to divine their "secrets", and played with some of them on tour.

And then, as everyone knows, Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, a playwright and drama teacher, met in a restaurant. They sat talking for eighteen hours running, jotting down the postulates for the new theater on paper napkins. In the early hours of the morning, they drove to Stanislavsky's Lyubimovka estate, and there they finished their talk.

Thus, the Moscow Art Theater takes its source from an amateur drama circle and fourth year students at the philharmonic. Therefore, it cannot be called the "mother of Russian and Soviet theater". But that's not a really essential point.



What surprised me was the accuracy and subtlety with which Mike Davidow understood the main thing about our theater and, in the first place, its mission. He knows that the new society whose problems are also being solved on the stage is built up by different people. He has lived in the country which produced Gagarin, but which at the same time, is inhabited by quite a few people who still labour under the burden of old habits and notions. And this being so, the mission of art, and the theater in particular, is to explore the complex processes going on in society and in the human soul, to captivatingly reveal the best there is in man, and wage a ruthless struggle against everything which, to quote Gogol, "is a disgrace to the genuine worth of man".

The building up of one's inner world is as difficult a job as the construction of a spaceship. Mike Davidow very fortunately begins the story of his theatrical impressions from the theater for children, for it is precisely here that the "moral effect" of the stage is so obvious. Moreover, it is essential for these young spectators who are only just entering the world. It is not fortuitous therefore that starting the world's first theaters for children was among the urgent tasks in the sphere of art after the Revolution, and that People's Commissar of Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky, undertook to head the management of one of these theaters in spite of being enormously busy with state affairs.

Mike Davidow has noted our theater's keen interest in people engaged in work, in creative effort, or in pursuit of a cause. Many of my foreign colleagues say that it's dull. Surely you don't think, they say, that in art an open-hearth furnace can take the place of sex which people in the Soviet Union are so shy about?

Of course open-hearth furnaces can't. But whoever said that we are interested in furnaces in a stage play or the technology of smelting steel? The object of exploration is man and his work. Everything about him is of interest,

including his relations with other people and how much they mean in his life.

Russian dramaturgy is full of love, with its sweetness and bitterness, with its grandeur and its tragedy. But we are interested in neither the techniques of steel smelting on the stage, nor the techniques of sex, especially when the latter overshadows the world for people.

As to whether a man is dull or not in his work, this depends on the man in question and the circumstances in which he is placed. A great number of people reveal their personalities in work more fully and obviously than in anything else, but others do not. Why? We want to know. Mike Davidow has correctly guessed how we look at things. What interests us exceptionally today is the relationship between a man's business sphere and spiritual world. Harmony would be best, of course. But what if there is no harmony? It is on some of the dramatic collisions arising when this balance is upset that Mike Davidow pauses to reflect, correctly noting that in all situations our playwrights and theaters invariably choose humanity as the criterion.

He writes: "I felt Soviet theater was strongest when it breathed the inspiring warmth of these great traditions, when it addressed itself to contemporary problems in that spirit. Russian literature and Russian theater were, above all, distinguished by their profound humanity, their extraordinary combination of unabashed, deep feeling for people, psychological and philosophic probing and masterful artistry. The contemporary Soviet plays that left me cold were those which lost this most important quality that made Russian literature known and loved throughout the world."

What we appreciate particularly is that the author realizes that the meaning of tradition does not end with Pushkin, Chekhov or Gorky, and that the influence of the great Shota Rustaveli on the Georgian theater is as essential, as that of Taras Shevchenko or Lesya Ukrainka on the

Ukrainian, and of Abai or Auezov on the Kazakh theater.

Mike Davidow goes on to say that the plays put on in Moscow and Leningrad, for all their importance, are not all that defines the concept of the "Soviet stage". Actually, this concept is made up of more than five hundred professional theaters and one thousand two hundred amateur, people's theaters which stage plays in forty-five languages of the nationalities inhabiting the Soviet Union.

Contributing to the concept in equal measure are the theater in Tartu, bearing the name of Vanemuine—the Estonian god of songs and dances, and the Gafuri Theater in Tajikistan. I must say that it was in the Gafuri Theater that recently I saw an actor with a tragic gift more powerful than any I have seen in a long time on either the Moscow or the Leningrad stage. Our Soviet theater might be likened to an orchard where every tree bears fruit, its own kind, naturally, that only that particular tree could bear. But this fruit can be reaped only in a common orchard.

Mike Davidow's book is called *People's Theater: From the Box Office to the Stage*. Its main theme is not the box-office returns, but the popular character of the theater, its emphasis on the idea it embodies and the skilful portrayal.

Everywhere in the world today theaters are fighting for an audience. How make people come to the theater and how evoke a response in them to what is shown on the stage? This is the root, probably, of such wastes as the above-mentioned "happenings" and the orgy of commercialism. This kind of theater, in our opinion, is well outside the realm of art.

A hundred and twelve million people, or almost half of the Soviet Union's entire population, attend our stage plays in a year. The figure is impressive, considering that infants and very old people have to be excluded. Hence the enormous responsibility which we, theater people, must bear. People come to our theaters and they expect what? A staggering impression? No, this is very rare. Entertain-

ment? Might be, but, as the old playwrights said, the mission of the theater is to give people a lesson in life, smiling. What, then—the boredom of dull moralizing? Oh no, never that!

"The theater is a political parliament where, as in the highest instance, all the most vital problems of the age are being discussed." These words belong to the great Russian writer Alexander Herzen, and, I think, they remain as valid as ever today.

A theater that is romantic, fearless in its dealing with vital problems, exciting and captivating, a theater in which the actor creates the vibrancy of the moment in the same breath with the spectators—a theater like that needs fear no competition either from the cinema or from television.

No little time has passed since my trip to the U.S.A., but I remember what I felt then. I felt that for all our unlikenesses we are very much alike—our people and our theaters. Much in the Americans resembled the Russians, and in the manner of the American actors I sensed the same striving for simplicity and veracity as in our actors.

Time passes. Peter Brook, the famous English producer, says that the idiom of the stage changes every five years. I think that the deep-seated roots of theatrical system and time-hardy ideas remain in the soil, while the crown and the leaves really do change. And new birds should sing among these new leaves.

I should like to hear the "sweet bird" of American theater. How does it sing today, I wonder? I loved hearing it during the Moscow tour of the Arena Stage. But, naturally enough, I should like to hear the voices of others too, to picture the theatrical life of America as a whole. What we need is a regular theatrical dialogue, and here a good and useful role would be played by such books as Mike Davidow's *People's Theater: From the Box Office to the Stage*.



## Preface

I was drawn to the Soviet stage for a number of reasons aside from the most important one—my life-long love for the theater. I wanted to discover for myself what the Soviet stage was really like. The cold war shrouded contemporary Soviet plays and theater in darkness and where there was not darkness, there was often distortion. The essence of what we were frequently told by our literary and drama critics, as well as by Moscow correspondents of the commercial press, was that there was nothing to write about (let alone to present on our own stage), because nothing new was happening in Soviet theater. The Soviet stage was portrayed as regimented, lifeless, and as timorously avoiding the serious problems of Soviet society, its conflicts and contradictions. With few exceptions, for a long time, no one even bothered to make a serious study of the Soviet stage, its directors, actors and playwrights. This distorted image rested and fed on ignorance, not only of the Soviet stage but Soviet life in general. Most of the self-appointed critics, I later personally discovered, never seemed to be bothered by their ignorance concerning Soviet life, theater or the



Russian language. They had come to the Soviet Union with the prescribed image firmly fixed in mind and only required a Moscow date line and their physical presence in a theater or two to equip them with the necessary credentials to designate themselves as "experts". I read some of the "clever" critiques, written in acid instead of ink, by some of these "experts" and I blushed more in shame than in anger. Increasing contact with Soviet reality has somewhat lifted the cold war blinders, and a growing number of U.S. playwrights, directors, actors and theater critics have seen for themselves something of the rich, dynamic life of the Soviet stage. The crude, distorted image is slowly but surely being shattered on the rock of this reality. But for many, the cold war myths still cling tenaciously. For most, I believe, it is a matter of honest ignorance, not only about Soviet theater, but of Soviet life. I am convinced it is impossible to understand the former without comprehending the latter. This brings me to the overriding reason why I was so attracted to Soviet theater. The Soviet stage is an honest reflection of the struggles engaged in and the problems faced by a dynamic society in the process of molding a more humane human being. It is not a photographic picture—that would hardly be either art or would offer a deep insight into Soviet society or the people who compose it. The Soviet stage focuses a probing eye above all on the PROBLEMS, the still existing conflicts and contradictions that confront this society of advanced socialism as it moves toward the higher phase—communist society. This is natural since the essence of drama is CONFLICT. But (as I point out later in this book) conflict in a socialist society is quite another thing as compared with our daily experience in our free enterprise society. Thus, the Soviet stage presents a unique opportunity for all who are honestly interested in getting a deeper understanding of what socialist society really is, what kind of people make it up, what problems they face and how they and their society grapple with them. If for

no other reason than to secure such a knowledge of Soviet society, I would say an acquaintance with Soviet theater would be extremely rewarding. But vital information is hardly all that one would receive. I believe such a knowledge would greatly enrich all who open themselves up to it, for no theater, in my opinion, offers so rich a cultural fare that extends from the world and Russian classics to the contemporary plays of Soviet and world dramatists. With all its existing shortcomings, I firmly believe, nowhere in the world is theater so loved, not in words but in deeds, nowhere does it receive the kind of all-out support from society and government, nowhere has it such a huge, well-trained staff of actors, directors and stage technicians, nowhere has theater been provided with the security and opportunity to practice its art on a permanent basis, nowhere has it been offered such a vast, appreciative and critical audience as in the Soviet Union. In a word, nowhere is theater so truly a people's theater from the box office to the stage as in the Soviet Union. This, as I have seen, has been noted, almost enviously so, by many US theater people who are well aware that theater in the richest country in the world hardly faces a similar situation. I am convinced that closer contact with this reality of Soviet cultural life will shatter many myths about "regimented" cultural life in the Soviet Union (as *sputnik* destroyed the myths about "regimented" Soviet education and science).

Perhaps one of the chief myths that has to be laid to rest is that Soviet theater is inhibited, and even intimidated by the Soviet government from probing into the serious problems and contradictions that confront Soviet society. This myth falls on its face once one examines the plays being written by Soviet playwrights and staged by Soviet theaters on contemporary themes. I have gone to great lengths to not only name many plays honestly dealing with vital questions but to review and discuss them. I have done this because I believe it is only in this concrete fashion

that the real picture of Soviet theater and Soviet life can be brought to Americans.

The socialist society moving toward communism, much as it is an incomparable advancement over capitalism, in the opinion of this writer, is hardly a utopia. It is a society of people who, though cleansed of much of the grime of the past in the course of living more than half a century without exploiting or being exploited, are still weighed down by the habits, customs and prejudices of these exploiter societies. This is understandable to anyone with a real knowledge and comprehension of history. From a historical point of view, half a century is, indeed, a brief period in the life of mankind. The real miracle is that so much has been accomplished under such trying and difficult conditions in eliminating the dirt of the past, in overcoming the social distortions caused by these exploiter societies. The objective, probing approach taken toward these problems is forcefully illustrated by the remarks by the eminent Soviet philosopher Academician Mark Mitin. Here is how Mitin puts the problems. Socialism, says Mitin, has inherited from capitalism "hypertrophy in the division of labor, considerable differences between mental and manual labor, between town and country and so on. These phenomena exert negative influence on social relations, on the spiritual life of man, on the nerves and health of mankind. . . . The socialist revolution puts an end to the capitalist alienation of labor but the liberation from the capitalist legacy, i.e., from the secondary products and by-products and consequences of alienation of labor, is a long and complicated process." I believe the failure to comprehend that the grime of past exploiting societies still clings to the makers, defenders and builders of the socialist revolution, the failure to understand that the cleansing process is a long, difficult and complex one, lies behind much of the early "disillusionment" suffered by many radicalised people, especially inexperienced youth. Many of these are revolutionaries-in-a-hurry who want not only

instant socialism but instant communism. But, as all who themselves experienced the complicated problems of building a new life ON FOUNDATIONS INHERITED from PAST EXPLOITING societies, on what Mitin correctly calls the "legacy" of capitalism, well know, the most difficult job of all is BUILDING the new life which demands far more skill, sweat and perseverance than making the revolution. That is why I believe an "honest" and "realistic" look at socialism in the most advanced socialist country, the Soviet Union, is so vitally necessary today. It is equally necessary for those who are socialist-minded, for such a "look" brings with it an understanding of socialism that sticks and is far more durable than ecstatic idealization. Soviet theater and contemporary Soviet drama are grappling with the "legacy" by delving deeply into Soviet human beings who themselves reflect, and are in struggle with, its deeply-embedded influences.

Let me give one example of how these influences are reflected in individuals. I choose one experience I had, not because it is typical, but because it sharply points up the existing problems arising from the "hypertrophy in the division of labor, considerable differences between mental and manual labor" which Mitin noted. I had, in fact, just finished reading Mitin's wise words when I met their essence in life, in the person of a Moscow porter who was carrying our suitcases to the train. The porter knew more than a little English (which was among his studies in an engineering institute), and so our discussion was conducted in English as well as Russian. He was in the process of becoming an engineer and would defend his diploma work next year, he informed me. Yet the porter did not seem to be buoyed by the future he looked forward to so confidently, as was the case with most I met who were in process of making such leaps in their educational and economic status. It became clear that what was bothering him was that he was working as a porter and was one of those who had failed to get accepted into an institute as a regular



student. Thus he had to take a harder path to study in his chosen field. What appeared to be uppermost in his mind was his PRESENT OCCUPATION rather than his FUTURE one. I pointed out to him that FEW PORTERS in our country could look forward to becoming engineers, especially without having to pay anything at all for such an education and with a guarantee of employment in their field. I want to stress again: the very opposite is the attitude of most I met who work in the day and study at night. Their number is legion in this first land of socialism where millions of workers are not only engaged in advancing their skill and knowledge on a scale unprecedented in history. More, the doors of higher education are not only opened wide to them without any charge but their plants and unions assist them by giving them time off (without loss of pay) to prepare themselves for examinations. Yet, notwithstanding this all-out assistance by their government and society, notwithstanding the massive transformation of millions of workers into highly qualified technicians and into engineers, "considerable difference between mental and manual labor" still exerts negative influence on social relations, on the spiritual life of man, on "the nerves and health of mankind". The porter I met seemed to be a battleground where all these influences were contending with the world of the present and the future. He himself was in the process of transition from manual to mental labor and was unconsciously reflecting the dual character of transition.

Soviet life is far richer in positive characters (they are the great majority) who consciously take part in advancing themselves and their country than in those who are still held back by the negative influences of the past. Yet, it would be not offering an honest picture if this struggle were presented as a continuous procession of victories or if the negative influences as they affect "social relations", "the spiritual life" and "nerves and health" of Soviet people were minimized. Perhaps such was the case in the

period of the personality cult when frequently the heroes and heroines were idealized. But this is hardly the case with Soviet theater today as any serious examination of the plays being written and staged will show.

The Soviet stage is increasingly addressing itself to the powerful drama of an entire people engaged in making a historic transition, in the struggle to overcome the "legacy" Mitin referred to, as it affects their social and production relations and their personal lives. It is a struggle not only to live better, but to be better human beings. The history of all great art, literature and theater, in the final analysis, reflects and charts that age-old struggle from Socrates to Sholokhov. But never before has it been so near to being transformed from a beautiful dream into a living reality as it is today in the Soviet Union. The struggle is still a long and difficult one, as Mitin (and Soviet leaders) admit. But no longer is it a struggle waged by a few courageous idealistic individuals: a new society is engaging its vast resources in this noble cause. This is the stuff of truly great drama. It is, indeed, unfortunate that the cold war has thus far succeeded in sealing it off to most Americans.

The Soviet stage presents a kaleidoscopic picture of the half-century progress of the socialist revolution: its storming of the heavens in October, its dauntless struggle for survival against the combined forces of world and tsarist reaction, its painful but triumphant lifting itself up by its bootstraps to build a modern industry and agriculture, its terrible ordeal and unmatched courage in the victorious battle against fascism and the most powerful and most barbaric military machine in history, its painful healing of its wounds; its grappling with the complex problems posed by the scientific and technological revolution and the moral questions that have to be solved in the molding of communist man and woman. In brief, the Soviet stage vibrates with the drama of pioneering the thorny, winding and uncharted path to socialism and now to the highway to communism. And the heroes of that real life drama

walk its stage as they live to haunt us in such plays as "Ten Days That Shook the World" (Taganka Theater), "The Rout" (Mayakovsky Theater), "The Man With the Rifle" (Vakhtangov Theater), "Bolsheviks" and "Eternally Alive" (Sovremennik Theater). Yet, it would not be correct to say that Soviet playwrights and theater are fully doing justice to Soviet reality. I frankly feel that both have not yet caught up with Soviet life, notwithstanding some very good plays that have recently appeared. This is particularly true in respect to presenting and probing the complex problems of contemporary Soviet life which are considerably more difficult to dramatize than the stormy days of October and the ordeals and triumphs of the Great Patriotic War. Soviet playwrights have not yet given the Soviet stage contemporary heroes who fully breathe the spirit of their times as do Pavel Korchagin in Nikolai Ostrovsky's "How the Steel Was Tempered", Levinson in "The Rout" (based on Fadeyev's novel), Davydov in Sholokhov's "Virgin Soil Uplifted". Perhaps more time and deeper thought are necessary to create such characters out of the exceedingly complex material offered by contemporary life. From what I have seen, I believe there is not only recognition of this gap between the stage and the material furnished by present day Soviet life but intensified efforts are being made to bridge that gap. This is reflected in such thoughtful and creative plays as "The Man from Outside" by Dvoretzky, "Valentin and Valentina" and "The Old New Year" by Roshchin, "Ascent to Mount Fuji" by Aitmatov, and "Steelworkers" by Bokarev, "Brother Alyosha" by Rozov. I have no doubt that we will yet be given characters who will take their honored place besides the heroes and heroines of October, the Civil and Great Patriotic wars. No playwright and no theater in the world have richer material to draw on.

A final word. My aim as I began my study was to understand the Soviet stage. I ended up by falling in love with it. Not because I saw perfection, far from it. Soviet theater,

I believe, still suffers from some conservative influences. These can hardly be attributed to the heavy hand of bureaucracy, as some critics of Soviet theater contend, although I have no doubt that Soviet playwrights and theaters do have to battle against the opinions of those who fail to understand and appreciate the new. The creative struggle to break new ground is just that—a struggle (one would think that we are strangers to this age-old struggle, judging by some of our critics). The conservatism I came across, I believe has its source not in present Soviet society but in past outlooks and attitudes. I fell in love with Soviet theater because it breathes the spirit of love of and confidence in mankind. I came to know and love its dedicated, extremely talented and hard-working actors, actresses, directors and technicians who have made Soviet theater renowned and respected throughout the world. I came to know and love its wonderful audience who as Lee Strasburg, the noted US director and teacher of theater pointed out, would inspire any actor and actress to outdo themselves. To both the performers as well as the spectators I extend my profound gratitude. The list of those who made this book possible is, indeed, a long one and I beg forgiveness in advance if I have overlooked mentioning any. They include Directors: Anatoly Efros (Malaya Bronnaya Theater), Georgi Tovstonogov (Leningrad Bolshoi Dramatic Theater named after Gorky), Kaarel Ird (Vanemuine Theater in Tartu, Estonia), Oleg Yefremov (Moscow Art Theater), Yuri Lyubimov (Taganka Theater), Oleg Tabakov and Galina Volchek (Sovremennik Theater), Yevgeny Simonov (Vakhtangov Theater), Andrei Goncharov (Mayakovsky Theater), Yuri Zavadsky (Mossoviet Theater), Ashier Mamilev, director (Theater Section of the Turkmen Ministry of Culture), Boris Ravenskikh (Maly Theater) and Mikhail Tsaryov, President of the All-Russia Theatrical Society (VTO) and a veteran actor of the Maly Theater (Maly celebrated its 150th anniversary in 1974), Juozas Miltinis of Panevėžys in Lithuania.



I want to pay particular tribute to the foot soldiers of the Soviet stage, the actors and actresses, who, in the final analysis, are the decisive element of Soviet theater, as all wise directors well realize. I came to know and to deeply respect their great dedication to their beloved art. I doubt whether one can find a harder working group anywhere in the world. I am particularly grateful to my dear friends, Vladlen and Margo Davydov of the Moscow Art Theater and Nina Doroshina (Sovremennik) for the invaluable insight into Soviet theater they imparted to me. I owe special thanks to Irina Silina of the Moscow State Theater Library for her considerable assistance in securing very helpful reading material. I shall never be able to fully repay my dear friend Maya Gordeyeva, tireless journalist, lecturer and head of the English Department of the Institute of Foreign Languages for her unsparing and invaluable aid. And I shall be eternally grateful to Alla Grechukhina, my interpreter-secretary and "voice" for three years.

Finally, I want to make clear that this book is only an introduction to the treasure-house that is the Soviet stage. It is a treasure-house I am determined to further explore. It was, indeed, to arouse such a spirit in others that this book was written. Soviet and US cosmonauts are together exploring the cosmos and I'm convinced that a similar joint exploration of our theaters, as well as our cultures generally, can be equally profitable to the American and Soviet people.

## A Real Cultural Revolution

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An American living in the Soviet Union gets to understand the real meaning of those much abused words, the cultural revolution. Ballet, opera, concerts and theater are as popular here as are our football and baseball. And there is not that great divide between Soviet sports fans and theater patrons as there is in our country. Ballet and stage stars are as well-known in the Soviet Union as the outstanding athletes. By contrast, while our prominent football and baseball players are familiar to millions of Americans, few can recall the names of our leading ballerinas or stage stars. This mass nature of culture is especially reflected in the PEOPLE'S character of the theater. As a playwright and a former drama critic for the *Daily World*, I was naturally drawn to the Soviet theater. And so, as soon as we arrived in Moscow, notwithstanding my rudimentary acquaintance with the language, I began to haunt the Moscow stage. At first I had to rely on my indefatigable interpreter-secretary, Alla Grechukhina, to follow the dialogue. But, even then, it was the magic of the footlights that basically broke through the language barrier. Then, the stage, just as the street and television, became my teacher. Thus, the difficult

Russian language was taught to me by hundreds of declaiming actors who never suspected they were giving me lessons as well as entertaining me. A working knowledge of Russian considerably increased my appetite for playgoing. But, perhaps, even more than the language, close daily contact with Soviet life established my firmest bond with Soviet theater. In the course of more than five years, I saw a good deal more than 100 plays, watched rehearsals at the Taganka, Malaya Bronnaya, Sovremennik and Leningrad Dramatic (Gorky) theaters, and interviewed some of the most prominent directors, among them Oleg Yefremov (Moscow Art Theater), Georgi Tovstonogov (Gorky Theater in Leningrad), Yevgeny Simonov (Vakhtangov Theater), Yuri Lyubimov (Taganka), Oleg Tabakov (Sovremennik), Andrei Goncharov (Mayakovsky Theater), Anatoly Efros (Malaya Bronnaya Theater) and Kaarel Ird (Vanemuine Theater in Tartu, Estonia), Juozas Miltinis (Panevėžys Theater, Lithuania). I also had an extremely valuable discussion on working conditions and relations between actors, directors and producers with Victor Tarasov, secretary of the Central Committee of Art and Cultural Workers' Union.

It was painful to note the appalling ignorance that largely exists in our country on the status of the contemporary Soviet stage. Just as years of a cold war approach to trade penalized the American people economically so have we been the losers culturally by closing the door on modern Soviet plays. I trust the beginnings of more normal trade relations following the three historic summit meetings in the Soviet Union and USA will find its reflection in a closer relationship with Soviet dramatists and theaters. I am encouraged in this hope by the noticeable interest in Soviet theater and the increased cultural exchange that has followed in the wake of the summit meetings. Incidentally, Soviet theaters erected no similar barriers to our own playwrights, and Soviet audiences are far more familiar with modern American plays than our theater-goers are

with Soviet plays. Just a brief enumeration of some of the U.S. plays on the current Soviet stage will demonstrate this point. The list includes: David Rabb's "Sticks and Bones" at the Sovremennik, "The Man of La Mancha" (a smash hit), and Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire" at the Mayakovsky Theater, Clifford Odets' "Golden Boy" at the Yermolova Theater, "The Rain Maker" by R. Nash at the Stanislavsky Theater, and Lillian Hellman's "The Little Foxes" at the Leninist Komsomol Theater. I've come across a dramatized version of Hemingway's "Farewell to Arms" in almost every Soviet city I visited. Loraine Hansbury's "A Raisin in the Sun", had a substantial run as did Arthur Miller's "Crucible", "The Price", "A View from the Bridge", and Gibson's "Two for the Seesaw". Edward Albee's, "Ballad of the Sad Cafe", is being performed at the Sovremennik and Robert Penn Warren's "All the King's Men" is still packing them in at the Yermolova Theater. In my discussion with Soviet theater people I found they had a far greater knowledge of our theater than we have of theirs and an intense desire for a closer relationship. There is particular interest in plays dealing with the great struggles for peace, Black liberation and democracy.

Our ignorance of today's Soviet theater has been mainly politically motivated. It is based on a mish-mash of half truths as well as on cold war malice. The ignorance and malice have given rise to a number of myths: that Soviet theater is conservative and lifeless and is shrouded in dogmatism and propaganda; that significant Russian theater ended with Chekhov; that Soviet theater is Russian theater; that there are no modern Soviet plays or playwrights worth producing (this is the rationale for the almost total blackout on contemporary Soviet plays on Broadway and even off-Broadway); that there exists an atmosphere of repression, less open and direct than under Stalin, but one that nonetheless stifles art, envelops the Soviet theater and cultural life generally; that the only



authentic voices of artistic and cultural expression belong to the handful who smuggle their works out of the Soviet Union or defect.

I discovered that some U.S. correspondents were such prisoners of the myths they themselves helped create that they could no longer visit Soviet theaters as simple theatergoers. Instead, every new play became the subject of malicious rumours and politically-motivated gossip, often supplied to each correspondent by his particular "dissident" sources. I will deal with this "cultural" approach to Soviet plays more concretely later on. To what ridiculous lengths some will go in their Sherlock Holmes pursuit of the scent of dissent is illustrated by a discussion I had with a well-known former Moscow correspondent for the *Washington Post*, Anthony Astrakhan, in the lobby of the Taganka Theater, on the opening night of Lyubimov's dramatization of a Russian classic novel, Chernyshevsky's "What Is to Be Done?". Astrakhan appeared to be quite frustrated by his very limited knowledge of Russian. It turned out, however, his exasperation had nothing to do with the fact that this handicap made it more difficult for him to enjoy the play. It had everything to do with what, above all, evidently brought him to Taganka that night—to discover the meaning "between the lines" that supposedly Astrakhan and the Soviet "censors" had both come to detect. "Did you catch any of the 'nuances'?", detective Astrakhan asked me furtively. And he explained that he was interested in the "nuances" because he wanted to know if anything was said by the actors that could result in the suppression of the play. Everyone knows, my colleague informed me knowingly, that Taganka may be soon closed down. The incident took place in the latter part of 1970. Today, both the play and the Taganka Theater are still going quite strong.

For the Soviet citizen, everyday living is unthinkable without CULTURE in every form and on every level. That this is so today can only be explained by the un-

precedented transformation wrought by the cultural revolution ushered in by the October Revolution. It was this cultural revolution which has determined the scope and character of Soviet theater. What most impressed me, an avid theater-goer in our own country, even before I looked at the Soviet stage, was the Soviet AUDIENCE. It's an audience of working people. The statistics cited to me by Kaarel Ird, director of Tartu's Vanemuine Theater, pretty much reflect the character of Soviet theater and the composition of theater-goers. I remember the first time I visited the famed Bolshoi, I spent more time looking at the audience than at the performers on stage. Many had obviously come straight from their shops and either didn't have the time or didn't bother to change their clothes. But they were very much at home, since most of the audience were similarly neatly but informally dressed. I saw very few coat and tails in the audience with the exception of some foreign dignitaries.

I am hardly alone in my admiration for the Soviet audience. Perhaps, nothing more impressed the more than 300 delegates and observers from 25 countries who attended the 15th Congress of the International Theater Institute which met on May 27-June 1, 1973, in Moscow, than the Soviet audience. I was an observer at the Congress. The big question raised by most delegates from the West was: "How can we get people to come to the theater?" And whatever questions on Soviet theater many of them may have come with they saw that getting an audience constituted no problem in the Soviet Union. The delegates discovered that not only were there very few empty seats, but that around every theater they were besieged by people asking for "spare" tickets.

I attended a performance of "St. Petersburg Dreams" (dramatization of Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment") at the Mossoviet Theater with the renowned US teacher of many famous stage and cinema stars, Lee Strasburg, and Ann, his attractive wife, and a well-known actress.

After the performance we met with Yuri Zavadsky, the Mossoviet Theater director and a dean of the Soviet stage. In typical Soviet style, the audience had given the cast an extremely warm reception and had strewn the stage with flowers. The Strassburgs could not restrain their enthusiasm at the audience's warmth. "With an audience like that, actors can be inspired to do anything", they told Zavadsky.

The cultural revolution long ago freed the Soviet theater from its narrow esoteric world (which is where it largely still is in our country). It opened theater doors more widely than ever in history. The arithmetic of this cultural revolution alone is staggering. Here are the figures presented at the Congress by Mikhail Tsaryov, President of the Soviet Center of the International Theater Institute. (I had the pleasure of meeting this veteran of the Soviet stage and seeing some of his excellent performances at the Maly.) The Soviet Union has 368 dramatic full-time repertory theaters, 41 opera and ballet (as well as a children's opera theater, the only one in the world), 52 children's theaters, 26 musical comedy and 100 puppet theaters. There are also special theaters for deaf-mutes. I saw an excellent film dealing with this theater made by J. Soto, then a student at the Moscow Institute of Cinematography. My son, Joseph, wrote the music for the film. Soto, like many other Chilean patriots, was compelled to leave his native land after returning home from his studies in Moscow.

The Soviet theaters draw an annual audience of more than 110 million. Their multinational character is revealed by the fact that productions are staged in 45 languages. In 1973, more than 400 plays by dramatists of the national republics were staged by Russian theaters alone. One of my most delightful experiences was attending the theater, music and art festivals of the national Republics which are regularly held in Russian cities, as well as in all Soviet republics. Thus, when I heard some of our theatrical people sweepingly characterize Soviet (they usually refer-

red to it as Russian) theater as extremely limited and traditional in form (after two or three days in Moscow), I felt embarrassed for them. They were only repeating the old myths. Aside from everything else, Russian and Soviet theater have been tremendously enriched by the great variety of forms and styles of 100 nations. In that respect we could, in all modesty, learn something from the Soviet stage. Incidentally, I saw a powerful dramatization of *Mother's Field* by the widely acclaimed Kirghiz writer, Chinghiz Aitmatov, in Alma-Ata. In modern stage technique, the Kazakh capital could hold its own with the best of ours. The play was performed in Kazakh, and ear phones transmitted a Russian translation.

But sheer statistics, impressive as they are, hardly tell the full story. In my wide travelling I discovered that the Soviet cultural stream courses throughout this vast land and flows into the most inconspicuous mountain hamlets, isolated desert settlements as well as in the lusty towns and cities springing up in the Far North and Siberian taiga. The theater is built along with the homes for builders of new Soviet cities. Every Soviet city of moderate size has at least one full-time professional theater. The doors are wide open to the mass of Soviet people among other things because there are no box-office barriers. Tickets, priced from 50 kopecks to a 2 ruble top (a few more kopecks for opening nights) for dramatic theaters and a three and a half ruble top for the Bolshoi, are within the reach of all.

One of the big problems Soviet theater faces is how to meet the rising demand which far outstrips even its massive facilities. A familiar sight are the perennial ticket seekers gathered around all Soviet theaters. Our ticket speculators and scalpers would have a field-day if they could corner the Soviet theater market.

The system of ticket distribution (strictly observed) in the Soviet Union prevents any such fleecing. On occasion you can come up against someone who still retains enough of our "free enterprise" spirit to make a ruble or so on his



personal ticket. And even a few who have some of our speculator blood in their veins. But by far, the average Soviet citizen who cannot use his ticket comes to the theater a little before the performance starts and sells the ticket for what he paid for it. At any rate, the system, as explained to me by Victor Tarasov, of the Art and Cultural Workers' Trade Union, makes it impossible for speculators to buy up blocks of tickets. Seventy per cent of the tickets are distributed through a central agency to kiosks and offices throughout the city. In Moscow you can find such kiosks in all Metro stations and along the main streets. Thirty per cent are kept at the local theater box office and are largely sold on special days familiar to the patrons of the theater. On these days one always finds long lines before the theaters. The director's office keeps one or two per cent for emergencies, usually foreign guests and visitors. Here I want to express my sympathy and admiration for the patient and understanding Moscow theater and concert goers. As international host to growing millions of tourists and visitors, Moscow gives first choice to the "gosti" ("guests"), a far more highly honored person than in our country. This naturally has to some extent made it more difficult for native Muscovites to get tickets, especially for the prized performances. I doubt whether this inconvenience would be taken with such patience and understanding by the highly individualistic citizens of our country. The attitude toward culture dictates the Soviet approach to the theater. Culture is regarded not as a PRIVATE LUXURY whose satisfaction is determined by the financial means of the individual. It is regarded as a SOCIAL NECESSITY WHICH SOCIETY AND THE GOVERNMENT ARE DUTY BOUND TO PROVIDE AND MAKE ACCESSIBLE TO THE PEOPLE. One of the early decrees signed by Lenin in 1919 and enacted and implemented by the newly-born socialist state was the decree on coordinating the theaters. Theaters were declared the people's property and the

responsibility for them was given to the People's Commissariat for Education. Fighting for its very life against intervention from the outside and the Civil War inside, the hungry socialist republic nevertheless appropriated substantial sums for paying the wages of actors, for costumes, scenery and all the considerable expenses that go to create the magic of footlights.

### **For Soviet Theaters— Also a Life Without Landlords**

Soviet theater rests on the solid foundation of the all-out support of the socialist state. A visit to any Soviet theater, just a look at its facilities, its spacious and attractive quarters, its art-gallery like rooms for relaxation during intermissions, its comfortable lunch rooms (where you can have a light repast or snack for 50 kopecks), its libraries and study rooms, will give one some idea of that "solid foundation". The rent for such buildings, let alone the cost of construction and maintenance, would be unthinkable in our private enterprise theaters. Only specially conceived and financed projects like New York's Lincoln Center and American Conservatory theater of San Francisco can compare with Soviet theaters. But there is only one Lincoln Center and only a relatively few really impressive theaters largely limited to the metropolitan centers in our country. In the Soviet Union they are numerous and spread out all over this vast land. Soviet theaters, like Soviet citizens, have no rent worries because they, too, live a "LIFE WITHOUT LANDLORDS". They pay rent to the state, but like in housing, it is nominal by our standards. On the other hand, one of the big factors making for the high price of tickets in the US is the exorbitant rent and construction costs of buildings in the theater districts (usually in the city's cen-

ter). Our main theaters are in constant hock to the big real estate corporations and financiers. Many theaters close down in our country not because there is no audience for them, but because they can't meet the landlord's rent or the banker's mortgages. But the socialist approach, the "solid support" of the Soviet state means much more than buildings. It, above all, **MEANS THAT ACTORS CAN DEVOTE THEMSELVES FULL TIME TO THEIR PROFESSION.** The unemployed, part-time actor is largely unheard of in the Soviet Union. There are 30,000 full-time actors working all year round at their profession in the Soviet Union and about 2,000 actors and a staff of 5,000 in Moscow's 25 dramatic repertory theaters (excluding Bolshoi, and a number of other musical theaters). Soviet playwrights don't have to trim the number of characters in their plays to suit the financial limits set by a play's promoters or financial "angels". The sheer size of the casts of some of the plays I saw (not to mention gala concerts and festivals involving hundreds of musicians and dancers which are quite common here) would bankrupt a producer or result in ticket prices far out of the reach of most Americans. But the Soviet audience gets it all for the same one to two rubles and what is more, hardly stops to reckon the cost. It was only I, brought up on the dollar calculation of performances, who bothered to count the number of actors in the cast as well as the musicians in the pit.

All Soviet professional theaters are permanent repertory companies. They have a repertoire of from 8 to 30 plays. Thus, Moscow patrons are annually offered a choice of about 500 plays. I would guess that is about five times the number presented at New York's theaters. The average Soviet theater has a permanent acting company of 60-65 and a full staff of 200; in Moscow it is 70-80 and 250 respectively.

## **Soviet Theater Is a Democratic Theater**

Soviet actors I spoke to recoiled at the very thought of being compelled to perform the same role every night for months as do their American colleagues. Watching the actors of Moscow's Taganka, Sovremennik, Vakhtangov, Mayakovsky, Art, Mossoviet, Malaya Bronnaya, Maly and Soviet Army theaters play as many as six different roles in the course of two weeks, I could understand why. Soviet actors and actresses are not and do not regard themselves as "stars" limited only to leading roles. People's Artist of the U.S.S.R. Yulia Borissova, popular actress of the Vakhtangov Theater, plays a simple servant in Nikolai Pogodin's "The Man With the Rifle" and the intensely complex Nastassia Philipovna in Dostoyevsky's "Idiot". I've seen Soviet top performers in bit parts no American "star" would even consider. The tyranny of the Producer and Director (both dominated by the tyranny of the box office in the U.S.) is replaced here by the democratic control of the theater group. The theater, the most collective of the literary arts, is regarded throughout as the instrument of collective creativity. A considered play first goes to the theater Art Council, then it is brought before the actors. The union contract states, no new plays can be included in a theater's repertoire before it is thoroughly discussed and voted on at a meeting of the entire acting company. I found this system to be in operation in all the theaters I visited. "It is the actor who will create the characters in the play. How can this be done if the actor does not feel the play is worth the effort?", Victor Tarasov asked me. Regular critical reviewing sessions of the work of the director and actors are held. The season's repertoire is decided on by the entire theater collective. No actor can be dismissed by a director. Only the local theater trade union committee can finally decide on the actor's competency. Soviet



actors are guaranteed a full-time job on completing intensive training in one of the acting schools. These are taught by famous actors and actresses, usually attached to a prominent theater. The Shchukin School is attached to the Vakhtangov Theater, the Shchepkin School—to the Maly Theater, and the Central Children's Studio—to the Children's Theater. Tuition is not only free, but students receive stipends. The schools train 1,200 actors during a four-year period. Upon graduation, students must accept an assignment to a theater in any part of the Soviet Union for a three-year period. Thereafter, they can audition for a theater in a city of their choice. The frustrating, often humiliating search for a theater that particularly plagues young actors in the US is unknown here. On the contrary, it is the theater which seeks out the new actors to meet the expanding demands of the vast and growing and highly critical Soviet theater public. There, of course, is a more competitive situation in respect to theaters in Moscow, Leningrad and other major cities. But the theatrical institutes of the great Russian cities did much more than train the future staff of the Russian Theater. They helped train and, in many cases, literally formed the theaters of many Soviet national republics. Thus, the Moscow State Institute of Theatrical Art trained 38 national theatrical studios and the Leningrad Theatrical Institute—24 studios.

Soviet actors are usually employed 10-11 months a year. This includes tours after the season closes, usually in July. Those in academic theaters like the Moscow Art, Vakhtangov, Maly and Mayakovsky theaters, receive a two-month and others a one-month vacation a year. There are seven rest homes and sanatoriums for actors in the Russian Federation alone. I visited the Home of Creativity and Rest and Chekhov's home in Yalta. Both dramatized the transformation that had taken place in the Russia the great writer and playwright loved and described so profoundly. Chekhov spent his last years here in a vain

effort to prolong the fluttering candle of his life. At that time Yalta had but its warming sun and pure air (reserved for the rich and the nobility) to offer, hardly enough to make up for the ravages of years of disease and ceaseless creative toil. Surveying these polyclinics in paradise, I thought: What if all this vast industry of health had been available to Chekhov and the countless talents which were wasted by tsarist Russia—Chekhov's Uncle Vanyas, Dr. Astrov, the Three Sisters! No one would have rejoiced more in the Yalta of today than the writer-doctor who so treasured the health and minds of the people. No one would have better appreciated its beautiful parks, forests, beaches—now available to the people—than the man who, as Dr. Astrov, cried out against the despoliation of Russia's vast natural resources under the tsars and capitalists, than the man whose garden, planted with his own sick hands, today stands as a monument to his love of man and nature. And how Chekhov would have been overjoyed to see Yalta's Home of Creativity and Rest for his beloved people of the theater. How he would have taken delight (as I did) in meeting its motherly, warmhearted director, Natalya Lebedevskaya! For no one understood better than Chekhov that the most beautiful characteristic in human beings is kindness, selfless concern for the good of others, expressed not in gushing, empty emotions, but in the hundreds of little things that are most meaningful. Natalya Lebedevskaya has devoted almost 30 years of her life to doing these "hundreds of little things" and that was why the most beautiful thing about my visit to the actors' home was not the garden-like surroundings, the countless little comforts, but the love I saw in the eyes of her "children"—many of them celebrated actors, actresses, directors, writers, and critics. We were gathered together with Natalya Lebedevskaya at a beautiful table. Assembled were Boris Chirkov, People's Artist of the U.S.S.R., famous for his "Youth of Maxim" on the Soviet screen (now with the

Gogol Theater), his attractive and talented wife, Lyudmila Genika, Merited Artist of the Russian Federation (also with the Gogol Theater); Maria Mironova, Merited Artist of the Russian Federation and one of the outstanding satirical actresses in the Soviet Union; Irina Chizhova, actress with the Moscow State Philharmonia, and Boris Poyurovsky, theater critic.

Our discussion ranged over many aspects of theatrical life in the US and USSR, often in a comparative sense, and the thought that pursued me throughout our discussion was the physical reality within which our discussion was taking place. Here was a home—in the fullest sense of the word—for people of the theater, that our actors, actresses, writers, would truly rejoice in. Like all Soviet citizens, my new friends at the table accepted all this as the normal state of affairs. And that is the way it should be. Established in 1934 in Alupka and in Yalta since 1956, the Actors' Rest Home plays host to 3,500 theater people a year. (There is another one in nearby Miskhor and, all told, there are eight sanatoriums for theater people in the Russian Federation alone.) The home is not only a place for rest and recreation—it is a bee-hive of creativity. Dramatists come here to write their plays, actors and directors to rehearse them. And for all this, theater people pay only 65 roubles for 24 days (some only pay 30 rubles or nothing at all).

In case of illness, actors and theatrical workers employed for eight years, receive 100 per cent of their pay and those with less than eight years' service—70-80 per cent. In addition to pay, actors receive a number of bonuses. These include quarterly bonuses for the successful fulfilment of the theater's production plan, two-months' extra pay if the particular play is a success and especially large bonuses if a Lenin award is won by the theater.

Actors and theatrical workers like all Soviet citizens are provided with free medical care and almost free nursery

service. Large theaters like the Bolshoi (it has a staff of 3,500) have their own polyclinic, nursery and kindergarten and rest home. Theatrical workers (like all Soviet citizens) receive their pension at 55 for women and 60 for men. However, few retire at that age. Ballet dancers get their pensions after 20 years' service and singers after 25. Actors and theatrical workers have a seven-hour day, five-day week and, when they voluntarily lengthen their work week, the additional time is added to their vacation period. Thus, from the stage to the audience, Soviet theater is a democratic theater.

It is the freedom from the pressures of insecurity (that plagues the overwhelming majority of our actors) as well as the all-round benefits they receive that has produced an unparalleled corps of competent, highly versatile actors. Moreover, actors, directors and dramatists are highly honored people here, in life as well as after death. Their distinguished careers are recognized by honored titles. The homes they lived and worked in are marked by plaques. Ulitsa Nezhdanovoi (Nezhdanova Street) in Moscow is a street of Russian and Soviet theatrical history.

### **Our Theater of the Box Office**

All this explains why Soviet theater is on a firm foundation. Not once did I hear of a theater closing down (as is quite common in our country). On the contrary, there is constant expansion to meet the ever growing demands of a widening audience. With all its extraordinary growth, Soviet theater has not yet caught up with public demand. Between 1966 and 1970, 46 new theaters were opened. And in the period of the 9th Five-Year Plan, ending 1975, 30 more were to open. The overwhelming majority of Soviet theaters are self-supporting. When a theater, however,



does incur a deficit, it is given financial aid by the government, but the reasons for its deficit are investigated and steps are taken to correct the situation.

Compare this situation with the state of affairs of our theaters. To begin with, as I noted earlier, in our country culture is a **COMMODITY**, and so the theater is a market place governed by the all-powerful box office. Thus, the playwright's product is, above all, estimated on the basis of how it will **SELL**, how well it will pay off the investors—just like any other business venture. There are, of course, occasions when the artistic merit of the play coincides with its profitability. But these are only occasions. Thus, the price of tickets on Broadway, particularly, \$6-\$12, (not counting speculators' prices) helps decide the character of the audience. Ours is quite a different audience from the one I observed in Soviet theaters. In our country, the theater is overwhelmingly patronized by the middle class, intelligentsia, and, in the case of Broadway, particularly by tired businessmen out to relax. There are millions of workers, who have never seen a live professional play in their lives. Terrence Carrier of the Washington Arena Stage told me in Moscow in 1973 that, according to a 1967 Ford Foundation survey (he worked on), only 3.5 per cent of our population ever saw a live, professional play. This situation also has a strong influence on the themes, the content of plays which producers consider potential "box-office hits". Thus, it is rare, indeed, that a play dealing with the life and problems of workers hits the stage. It is the problems (with special stress on the sexual) of the middle class that are primarily explored. The fact that the theater is unrelated to their lives, also explains why so few workers in our country patronize it. Then, too, as I indicated earlier, the theater in the US is largely concentrated in a few major metropolitan centers, (in recent years there has been an increase in the number of theaters in medium-sized cities). As for repertory theaters, there is but a

handful, and these are not in any sense comparable to Soviet repertory theaters. All this results, among other things, in a very precarious existence for the overwhelming majority of US actors. No group of workers is in as intense competition for a job (a role) as are actors and actresses. As far as working at their professions is concerned, many are in a permanent state of depression (some 80 per cent being compelled to seek other employment as the basis of their livelihood). Unlike in the Soviet Union, not only are they not guaranteed permanent work at their professions, but actors and actresses, as well as playwrights in our country, have to pay their agents to secure a role or have their plays produced. (My Soviet friends found this hard to understand.) Their livelihood, as well as their professional careers, is a gamble on a "hit", on a "long run". And it is the lucky few who hit the jack pot to fame and fortune. It is true, much has been done by the Actors' Equity, the union of actors and actresses, to provide for minimum standards of pay and to protect the rights of their members. But the very character of the conditions within which the theater and the arts function where culture is treated as commodity limits the scope of the union's activity. (It should be remembered that far more actors and actresses are not members of the Actors' Equity than are on its rolls.) As for the "all round" social benefits Soviet actors receive (which I enumerated), the benefit performances frequently organized in the US to provide for aged, sick and impoverished actors testify to the insecure existence of many members of our acting profession. Moreover, with all our vaunted democracy and freedom of expression, most actors, who are only too glad to get a role, have little to say about the choice of a play. This is considered the exclusive prerogative of the producers, investors and directors in that order.

The rebellion against Broadway box-office domination led to the mushrooming of dozens of off-Broadway

and university-based theaters throughout the country. I became familiar with many of them in the two years I served as drama critic for the *Daily World*.

This is not the place to evaluate either the movement or the content of their plays and performances. They vary considerably, but they have this in common: a desire to produce plays which are not determined by the Broadway box office and an eagerness to reach a far wider audience. Perhaps one of the most significant developments has been the emergence of Black theaters and Black playwrights in the wake of the upsurge in the ghettos. It is here that the future of our theater appears to be particularly promising. But with rare and only temporary assistance from rich foundations seeking to influence their direction, these theaters operate on a shoe string. They are mostly housed in dilapidated buildings with seating capacities from less than a hundred to two or three hundred. By agreement with the Actors' Equity, actors are permitted to work in these theaters at nominal wages, far below the union scale, since without this leeway none could operate at ticket prices which are well below those charged by Broadway. (In recent years, however, rising expenses have boosted ticket prices considerably in the off-Broadway theaters as well.) Thus, the life span of many of these theaters is usually a short one.

The struggle for a people's theater in the US has to be conducted not only without the "solid support" of the US government but against the economics of a society which treats culture as a commodity. What adds insult to injury is that this abrogation of the responsibility by our government is turned into a virtue by some avid defenders of free enterprise who claim that only in the absence of federal financial assistance can there be true artistic freedom for all. This is the same kind of "freedom" pilloried by Anatole France (1844-1924) when he declared: "the law, in its majestic equality, forbids the

rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread".

Perhaps nothing hit home to me the stark contrast in the attitudes of the two worlds I lived in more than this item I found tucked away in the copy of the *International Herald Tribune* (September 9, 1974) I received in Moscow: "Hundreds of Depression-era plays, set designs, posters and photographs, financed by the Works Projects Administration program for unemployed writers and artists but believed lost have been discovered AFTER 24 YEARS IN AN OLD AIRPORT HANGAR NEAR BALTIMORE BY TWO GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS." Discarded (as was the Federal Theater Project which was dismantled by the government) was "a unique and huge record of American drama in the crucible of social change" which included "the working scripts of 1930s adaptations of classic plays ... many previously unpublished original plays, some of which may have been written by prominent playwrights using pseudonyms". The article correctly explains that pseudonyms were used because the well-known dramatists "were too proud to let anyone know they were accepting money from the government". It does not point out, however, that the government was hardly "too proud" to deny them even that pittance when it dumped the theater program as an unnecessary frill. Also gathering dust in the old airport hangar were "dozens of adaptations of plays and perhaps some original plays produced under the federal program by black acting groups during the late 1930s". The article notes that "until the government subsidized the theater during the Depression, scholars interviewed by the *Washington Post* said yesterday, Black theater was virtually non-existent". And it adds: "The collection could provide new insights into Black drama ... those who participated in productions included Orson Welles and John Houseman who directed noted Black productions in Harlem." Playwrights included Maxwell Anderson, Paul



Green and Elmer Rice, who served for a while as FTP administrator." This little "item" stirred up memories that should make many of our prominent senators, congressmen and other prominent officials, as well as many publishers of our newspapers blush with shame. For they bear the responsibility not only for the 24-years' loss of this "unique" record of U.S. drama, but for the destruction of the only beginnings of a people's theater in our country. As New York City organizer for the Unemployed Councils (later merged into the Workers Alliance) I am personally familiar with this disgraceful episode that has been so costly to the American people. What a story this "unique" record has to tell! One of the best plays could be written about these hundreds of plays lost for 24 years in an "old hangar". For how they got "lost" explains much not only about the crisis of our theater but the anemic cultural diet of the mass of the American people. And the responsibility for this state of affairs lies not with our people as is claimed by some of our elitist critics but on our government and "free enterprise" society. The hunger for the theater and the arts experienced by the American people as well as our untapped treasures of talent were particularly revealed during the years of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Given organized direction by the Unemployed Councils and later the Workers Alliance that hunger burst through the anti-cultural crust of our free enterprise society. The plays in the "old hangar" would have never been born, the "unique record of American drama in the crucible of social change" would have never been recorded, and Black theater would have never been accorded an opportunity to enrich our stage if not for the militant struggles, sit-ins, picket lines, demonstrations and hunger marches on Washington participated in by thousands of unemployed actors, actresses, artists, dancers and writers. It was this virtual cultural uprising that finally compelled the Roosevelt New Deal Government to establish Federal The-

ater, Dance, Music, Arts and Writers' Projects. Thousands of talented young men and women, including many Black Americans, for the first time were provided an opportunity to put their professional skills to work. Thousands more were developed into versatile artists and performers. And for the first time in their lives hundreds of thousands of US workers, who never before were inside a theater, came in contact with the magic of the stage. And they liked it!

But not the forces of reaction. These beginnings of a people's culture and theater were attacked as "boondoggling" (useless, artificially devised work), a special term of derision spawned in that slanderous campaign. People's theater was denounced as an "unnecessary frill". The government had no right to "waste" the taxpayers' money on such trivia, **THE GOVERNMENT HAD NO BUSINESS BEING IN THE BUSINESS OF CULTURE, IT WAS DECLARED.** Many of the US newspapers so busily engaged in denouncing Soviet "suppression" of freedom of artistic expression today, opened their pages to the infamous campaign to dismantle the fragile structure of a people's theater and arts. Many editorially joined in the attack on "boondoggling" while others maintained a craven silence. It was left to the unemployed movement, supported by progressive trade unions and community organizations and, particularly, by the Communist Party of the US, to conduct a bitter-end struggle to preserve the Federal Theater and Arts projects. Sit-ins on stage, as well as in the auditoriums were conducted by actors, actresses, dancers, musicians and the audience. (I, personally, participated in a number of such actions.) They were often brutally attacked by police who filled the prisons with protestors shouting "people's theater must live". But, the reactionary forces were triumphant. People's theater did not live. The Federal Theater and Arts projects were dismantled and cut off from all governmental financial assistance.

I cite this brief history of the struggle for a people's theater and culture in the US because I believe it has much to do with the present serious state of affairs of our theater and culture generally.

### Theater of the Revolution

In the Soviet Union, as I already noted, the process was entirely reversed: it was (and is) the government and society that assumed the responsibility not only to create a people's culture, but to make the heritage of the best in the cultures of past societies available to the entire people. While our government was demolishing the Federal Theater projects, the Soviet Government of the 1920s and in the midst of the great industrialization program of the 1930s was establishing theaters among peoples who never before had them and some who even didn't have an alphabet. Even in the crucial days of the nazi invasion, when the Soviet Union was fighting for its life, great care was taken to preserve the theaters of occupied areas. Kaarel Ird, renowned director of Estonia's Vanemuine Theater, told me how its staff was evacuated to unoccupied areas so that with liberation they could immediately re-establish their theater in Tartu. The same was done for all the other theaters. And, when I visited Leningrad's famous Hermitage Art Museum, I heard from the lips of Dora Semyonova, our unforgettable guide, how besieged, starving Leningrad, 900,000 of whose population perished in the blockade, saved the priceless treasures. Mustering their last reserves of strength, Leningraders in six days evacuated more than a million art objects. Listening to Dora Semyonova, I understood why the harsh sound of nazi boots never desecrated Leningrad's temple of art.

Those who charge Soviet theater with being conservative and dogmatic only betray their ignorance. To be sure there were and are well-established Soviet theaters which failed to replenish and refresh their great stage traditions, as is the case everywhere, at times. But this is hardly characteristic of the dynamic Soviet stage as anyone who takes the trouble to get acquainted with it will soon find out. There are problems—serious ones at that—and they are frankly discussed, particularly in the *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, the mass-circulation weekly of the Soviet intelligentsia (almost a million and half readers). But they are far from the problems manufactured and distorted by tendentious critics with an anti-Soviet axe to grind. I will deal with these problems later on.



## Leningrad's Theater for Young Audiences: To Educate the Heart

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To understand the role played by Soviet theater one must begin at the beginning with the theaters for children and youth. If the Soviet Union has by far the world's largest number of theatergoers, its 47 modern, fully equipped and well staffed permanent repertory theaters for children and teenagers have had much to do with this. This was hit home to me not by the impressive statistics, but by the few memorable days I spent with the Leningrad Theater for Young Audiences. A visit to this unique theater explains not only the role the theater plays in the life of the Soviet people but in mass education and in the bringing up of good human beings. At the conclusion of my visit I asked Zinovy Korogodsky, the extremely capable and dynamic artistic director of the theater, to explain the main aim of his theater. Korogodsky's sensitive face lit up (like all Soviet directors, actors and actresses I met, he literally lives **IN** as well as **FOR** his theater), and, after a moment's thought, he replied: "**TO DEVELOP THE TALENT OF AUDIENCES**". I remarked that the word **TALENT** usu-

ally was associated with those who occupied the stage and not the seats of a theater. Korogodsky's vivacious eyes sparkled as he nodded understandingly and added: "You asked me for our aim. To develop the **TALENT** of those who sit in the seats is the very essence of our theater." He paused and mused aloud: "What do we mean by developing (the Russian word 'vospityvat' is more expressive, it literally means to 'bring up') the talent of audiences? To make our Soviet people culturally and spiritually richer. This must not only start with childhood but it must be done systematically. We want to open up the world to our children with all its complexities. We want to teach them to take joy in beauty. We want to make them better human beings." Korogodsky's definition of the theater's credo was summed up for me in these memorable words by Lada Surina who heads its pedagogical department: "If the aim of the school is to educate the minds of children, our is to educate **THEIR HEARTS**." Soviet people truly go to the theater like they go to school—neither stops with age. The theaters for young audiences and the secondary schools both cater to the same age levels—7 to 17. The link between these theaters and the schools is not only close; it is extremely well organized and **SYSTEMATIC**. But before I go into that vital aspect let me describe the physical and human resources the theater mustered to **EDUCATE THE HEARTS OF CHILDREN**.

The Leningrad Theater for Young Audiences is housed in a vast palatial building. One gets used to palaces in this land of socialism—the metros are underground palaces, the Young Pioneers have palaces in every city, workers clubs are palatial, as are sanatoriums. So why not theaters, the temples of art? But much as I had become inured to palatial surroundings, I frankly had not expected to see them lavished on a children's theater. My surprise, in a way, revealed my own underestimation of the role played by these theaters. And I must confess

that prior to my visit to Leningrad's Theater for Young Audiences I had hardly attached the importance to them they merit. In part, this is because in our country children's theaters hardly exist on a similar scale, and where they do, they are largely "fairy tale" theaters. The Leningrad Theater for Young Audiences occupies a beautiful modern building, five stories tall and a good half of a city block long (about 62,000 square meters in area, not including the park-like surroundings). It contains 65 rooms, 30 for its artists, 30 for administration and services, 5 for business and reception purposes. It boasts a beautiful circular auditorium that seats 1,000, a large revolving, receding and rising stage, 16 meters in height and 300 square meters in area, an art gallery-like lobby and four large rehearsal rooms.

Even more impressive than its size and facilities is the staff engaged in EDUCATING THE HEARTS of the children. It consists of 350 persons (actually 450, if the actors' school, which is attached to and works with the theater but is under the Theater Institute, is included) who form the permanent company of full-time workers and bring theater to the children 10 months a year. The theater annually presents 410 performances. The staff breaks down as follows: 65 actors and actresses, 18 musicians (the theater has its own orchestra), 26 who compose the directing and artistic corps, 110 who make up the technical department (stage hands, make up designing, lighting, etc.) and 109 in service and administration. The Actors' Studio, as I mentioned, has 100 students and teachers. These statistics were supplied to me by Ruvin Shapiro, the theater's financial and economic director.

Shapiro, a sturdy, vigorous looking man who hardly looked his age, has been with the theater for 45 years. When I told him I was interested in getting exact data on the size, space and staff of the theater, I could see he was a bit puzzled. Soviet citizens take their palaces and lavish facilities in their stride. But when I explained

that such figures would be helpful in getting across to Americans the scope of the Leningrad Theater, Shapiro called in Valery Klaibman, the 26-year-old chief engineer. Klaibman laid out the blue prints and he and Shapiro proceeded to count the rooms and estimate the area occupied by all the theater's facilities. I asked Shapiro how the theater was financed. He explained that one half of its income came from the box-office receipts and the other half was supplied by the state. The annual budget amounts to about 600,000 rubles a year. "Actually, the state is not subsidizing us but our audiences," Shapiro noted. I looked puzzled, so Shapiro explained. "You see our top ticket price is 60 kopecks (about 70 cents, and there are seats for as low as 20 kopecks). We always play to packed houses. Well, if we charged something like the price charged by other Soviet theaters (from 40 kopecks to 2 rubles.—*M.D.*) then we would need no subsidy, we would be able to fully meet our budget from our box-office receipts." Shapiro pointed out to me that the Soviet Government's concern for the cultural education of children was hardly limited to such subsidies. He recalled how during Leningrad's 900-day siege and encirclement by nazi forces, when hunger and cold claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands, the people of Leningrad and the Soviet Government evacuated the theater, its staff and equipment to the Urals. There they continued to function and to entertain soldiers and sailors on the front lines. "It not only demonstrated how our Soviet society values culture. It demonstrated our confidence in our victory. We knew we would again perform for our children in Leningrad and we had to be ready," Shapiro said, simply.

The theater resumed its work as heroic, battered Leningrad turned to the enormous task of healing its wounds and reconstruction. A theater dedicated to educating the heart set about healing the invisible but even more painful spiritual wounds inflicted upon Leningrad's children.



Despite the immense problem of providing a roof over the heads of 25 million homeless Soviet citizens, the money was found to bring theater to children.

I learned about the functions and activities of Leningrad's Theater for Young Audiences the best way—as I directly participated in them. It was all done spontaneously, without any previous arrangements, and thus gave me a good picture of the theater's daily life. I had met Korogodsky in Moscow during UNESCO's theater institute congress in 1973 and had told him I was writing a book about Soviet theater. "How can you write a book about Soviet theater without writing about its theater for young audiences?" Korogodsky asked me accusingly. I must confess the thought had not entered my mind and I attributed Korogodsky's pique to parochial pride. I now realize how wrong I was and how right Korogodsky was in being so outraged at my temerity in ignoring his theater. But even when I went to Leningrad it was primarily to get to know its famous Bolshoi Dramatic Theater named after Gorky. I still didn't take too seriously the city's theater for young audiences. I decided that since I was already in Leningrad I may as well telephone Korogodsky. It was early Sunday morning, and I had a free day. "Come on right over," Korogodsky invited. Thus began an intensive, interesting and extremely informative day. It was non-stop activity from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Among other things, it revealed to me how intense and creative was the daily life of Korogodsky and his staff of educators of the heart. Korogodsky barely had time to greet me—he rushed me to a rehearsal of "Boris Godunov" by the Russian Shakespeare, Alexander Pushkin. It was a first rehearsal and the atmosphere was quite informal. The actors (mostly young) were casually seated along the sides of the room. On the walls were rough sketches and symbols depicting scenes in the play. Present also was a group of 25 leaders of amateur dramatic groups from Moscow who had come for a five-day

study of the theater. The Leningrad Theater for Young Audiences is renowned throughout the Soviet Union as well as Europe. Later, I met a group from Dresden, German Democratic Republic. I was told that the Children's Theater from New York University (Albany), which had presented "The Wizard of Oz" in Moscow in 1974, (which I had seen) had also visited the theater and understandably was quite impressed.

But to get back to "Boris Godunov". Korogodsky briefly outlined the particular scene and the rehearsal began. An improvised high platform, such as was used for ceremonial occasions in those times, was dragged onto the "stage". Two young actors entered from the outside door, and, after a brief hot exchange of words, one of them began to handle the other rather roughly. They were enacting a scene depicting the struggle between the supporters of Tsar Boris (who had just died) and the followers of the False Dmitry, the pretender to the throne. Korogodsky stopped short the fighting. It wasn't because it was too rough—it was because it did not "ring true". "Misha," he admonished the aggressive young actor, "you are acting like a plain hooligan and not like a nobleman who is angry because he is being asked to betray his "tsar," Korogodsky exclaimed. The scene never got beyond the brawling. Korogodsky kept interrupting it repeatedly because it still did not "ring true". Finally, the actors shifted to another scene which they executed much better.

Korogodsky, I observed, not only knew every line of Pushkin's "Boris" down to its subtlest accent, but was immersed in the times. And his stubborn insistence on truthful depiction of every detail was aimed at making the times of Boris UNDERSTANDABLE IN A CONTEMPORARY SENSE. In this respect, he had a problem to contend with. "Boris" is as well known to Soviet school children and Soviet people as are our classics in our schools. And the image created by Moussorgsky's genius hovers over all concepts of Boris and his times. Korogod-

sky's aim was to present a fresh interpretation that would be more in tune with contemporary understanding. The main characters were to be the people—the mass—(as Moussorgsky did to a great extent in his dramatic crowd scenes). The crowd was to be not just an anonymous mass but an assemblage of individual characters, each reflecting a strata of the society of the times. Thus, I observed, Korogodsky's attention was focused on the individuals in the crowds, each of whom had a small but important role to play. It was like putting together the pieces of a mosaic. Korogodsky stressed the pain and suffering of the people. "Pushkin's profound patriotism lies in his feeling for the people's suffering and giving voice to it. This is the central theme of his 'Boris' and it is this you must feel and express deeply," he told the actors. He singled out the actor who was portraying the *yurodivy* (God's fool), and doing an admirable job. "You are a young actor and will yet play many roles, but few will be as important as the one you are now playing. The text is very little but it is the lament of the *yurodivy* that most profoundly expresses Russia's centuries of suffering under the tsars." It was good in a way that I was introduced to the theater so abruptly, without a formal presentation of its aims. The few hours at rehearsal were enough to indicate the character of the theater and its approach.

Korogodsky's demand for "truth" in respect to seemingly insignificant details reflected far more than a director's whim or strictness. It was closely linked with the entire concept of what a theater for young audiences should be like. This was explained to me by Mikhail Stronin, head of its literary department, a young man who impressed me as being extremely knowledgeable and devoted to the theater educating the hearts of the young. Stronin, incidentally, seemed to also act as the theater's foreign minister, quite a job in itself for this internationally known theater. He spoke an excellent English

and what he outlined to me in theory was illustrated by what I observed in practice as I went from rehearsal to acting and dancing classes and examinations, to plays, and, of course, by the AUDIENCE, the chief target of the theater. The audience to which the theater addresses itself is composed of four age groups: 7-9, 9-11, 11-14, and 15-17. Plays are intended for each age group but often they fit all ages simultaneously. The concentration is on the 10-15 age level, because it is felt that it is during these years that the problems faced are most complex. Moreover, it is during this period that respect for parents is loosened and esteem for teachers also tends to decline.

Soviet pedagogues, psychologists as well as producers, believe children between 10 and 15 years of age need and must receive more consideration and attention to help them in the difficult years of their adjustment to life.

At an earlier age, it is felt the school, the parents and puppet theaters largely meet the needs of the children. Thus, the theater is viewed as an additional and powerful force for bringing up Soviet youth in the spirit of concern for one another, helping them to understand and to meet the complex problems of life, to appreciate beauty, to distinguish between cruelty and strength, to feel the suffering of others. "We reject a condescending approach to young theater-goers based on 'simplifying' plays for them. We reject the concept of a *Yolka* theater," Stronin declared heatedly. "By '*Yolka* theater', he meant limiting theater to the kind of light entertainment characteristic of 'New Year affairs', the equivalent of our Christmas parties for children. Evidently there were and may still exist sharp differences on this score.

Stronin went on to define the approach of the Leningrad and ALL SOVIET children's theaters. "Children and young theater-goers want and have the right to be presented with plays of depth, sophistication and of first rate quality—not plays that are specially tailored for children. Any play that is written with the idea in mind



—this is for children—usually ends up being patronizing and second-rate. This is a serious underestimation of children. They understand far more than many adults and often their parents think they do.” Stronin spoke with the passion of one who had long struggled against the tendencies he was describing to me. “Children have the same problems as all human beings,” he said, “though, of course, their capacity to grasp and grapple with them is different. But that is all the more reason why they want and need answers on how to deal with these problems. And the theater which employs the powerful medium of art to focus on and grapple with problems can and must be of assistance to them. This does not mean that theater should not be entertaining—all theater on all levels and of all genres has to be entertaining—but it has to be ON THE LEVEL OF ART. I’m all for fairy tales—who doesn’t love them at any age? But children need and must receive a full, all-round cultural development, one that will develop to the utmost their taste and esthetic sense and that will open up to them the manifold levels and forms of art. How can they get such a development if the cultural process is limited or concentrates on the ‘fairy tale’ level?” Stronin paused and added: “Moreover, they will better appreciate and more deeply understand fairy tales if they learn to appreciate Shakespeare’s ‘Hamlet’ and Pushkin’s ‘Boris Godunov’.”

Stronin stressed the point made to me by Korogodsky—the importance of constant and systematic attendance at the theater. One almost had the feeling that the leaders of the theater regarded it as much a part of systematic upbringing of children and youth as the schools. The latter, incidentally, regard the theater in that light as their mutual relationship (which I shall deal with shortly) indicates. Finally, Stronin emphasized that the theater rejected the idea that it should be only for young audiences. He put the issue simply and bluntly: “How can children respect a theater their parents don’t re-

spect? You know how children look up to their parents, to adults in general, how much they want to see what they see. Well, if the parents avoid our theater they will shun it too. Children don’t want parents to be waiting for them OUTSIDE IN THE LOBBY.” Thus, the theater concentrates even more on bringing family groups to its performances than school groups. That it is eminently successful in achieving this aim was revealed to me by the composition of the audiences that I observed. The age groups the theater concentrates upon, of course, predominated (tickets are first of all and largely made available to them), but the audience was fairly mixed, and family groups as well as older children were well represented. Most important of all, it was obvious that parents hardly viewed their presence at the theater as “duty”—they clearly enjoyed the performances and for good reason—they were on the high level of art that Stronin spoke of and that Korogodsky demanded of the actors and actresses during rehearsals.

Two presentations I saw revealed the broad and diversified character of the theater’s repertoire as well as the versatility of the actors and actresses. The first was “Our Circus”, a delightful and clever burlesque of the popular Soviet circus. Conceived and directed by Korogodsky and performed with gusto, it was theater of unrestrained fun. Yet, it never for a moment played down to its audience—it was sophisticated enough and on a sufficiently high artistic level to meet the tastes of the highly knowledgeable and critical Soviet audience. As fast moving and exciting as the Soviet circus itself, it was Chaplinesque in its pantomime of the tricks animals are put through. Performed by human beings, the well-known “animal acts” were at once refreshing and satirical. The actors were “dogs” which solved arithmetic problems, “bears” that danced and did somersaults, “bulls” that chased bull-fighters out of the ring. They went through their “tricks” with such boredom and accepted their “reward” with such

dirty looks (as if to say: "Is that all we get for this?") that you sympathized with the hardworking, underpaid animals, as you laughed at them. Among other things, "Our Circus" revealed the all-around training actors and actresses receive in pantomime, dancing and acrobatics. It was the kind of a presentation that could be (and is) enjoyed by all age groups up to the *babushkas* and *dedushkas* who laughed as hard and as often as their grandchildren. No wonder "Our Circus" has been running for seven years.

The next evening I attended an entirely different type of a presentation: "THIRTEEN YEAR OLDS WHO WENT OFF TO FIGHT". The play consisted of six dramatized vignettes depicting the role played by children during the early years of the October Revolution. And what made them all the more poignant was that the little heroes never stopped being children. It was their child-like innocence and trust in human beings that led on their death at the hands of an enemy who was burdened with no such frailties. There is the boy partisan who dies at the hands of White Guard Cossacks because he interrupts his mission and delays his escape to befriend a terrified, homeless girl; there is the boy who naively tries to convince a White Guard officer prisoner that he should take the side of the people and is killed by him when he leaves his rifle unguarded; there is the boy guarding bags of flour for starving Soviet people who plays Chopin on an abandoned piano for a deranged, homeless girl, both are killed by kulaks; there is the dying Young Pioneer who until his last breath refuses to allow his grandfather to put back the icon on the wall, and, finally, there is the boy who is so determined to learn to play a trumpet in one day so that he can pay tribute to the martyrs of the Revolution that he offers his boots to an old musician in exchange for lessons. I watched the faces of the children. The evening before they were creased with smiles, now they were sombre and thoughtful. Life was

not just the mirth of "Our Circus"; it was also tragedy and self-sacrifice. It not only gave laughter and enjoyment, it also demanded responsibility, courage, concern for one's fellow man. This is what Korogodsky and Stornin meant when they told me that theater must bring life in all its complexities to children. And I could see by the thoughtful countenances that they were also correct when they stressed that children had a right to know fully and honestly about the hardships and sorrows of life as well as its joys. The Leningrad Theater's repertoire reveals how rich and varied is the fare offered the young theater-goers. Its 25 presentations include Russian and world classics and contemporary Soviet and foreign plays, tragedies and musicals. It offers Shakespeare, Pushkin, Ostrovsky, Gorky, as well as modern Soviet playwrights and writers like Roshchin, Rozov, Mikhalkov, Korneichuk, Vassilyev and Tendryakov. The theater is preparing to stage "The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail" by Robert Lee and Jerome Lawrence who visited it three years ago. I saw a number of scenes from the play put on by second-course students of the studio attached to the theater. They caught the spirit of the play admirably, if not the full American flavor.

The repertoire includes original forms of theater that are hard to categorize. "Our Circus" is one of a series of "OURS" ("Our Lesson", "Our Chukovsky"), which were worked out by Korogodsky together with the staff. "Our Lesson" is a dramatization of the theater's experiences with its youthful audiences and parents, that is DESIGNED FOR PARENTS. It is extremely popular with the latter. "Our Chukovsky" is a musical presentation of some of the most popular stories by this beloved Soviet story-teller for children.

The theater puts on four new plays a year. It draws on world and Soviet classics and maintains close relationship with the best Soviet writers many of whom write plays at the request of the theater. Theaters for young



audiences are held in high repute by the Soviet cultural world. Not only do the best Soviet writers write for them but many of the top directors and dramatists got their start and were long associated with children's theaters. Among them are Victor Rozov, a leading playwright; Anatoly Efros, a well-known Moscow director, and Sergei Mikhalkov, a top writer for cinema and theater. The relationship between theaters for young audiences and the schools is so close and interacting that actually it is difficult to draw a line between them. **THE THEATER ACTUALLY IS A CULTURAL ADJUNCT OF THE CLASSROOM. IT ADDS A NEW HUMAN DIMENSION TO THE CLASSROOM LESSONS.** It gives flesh and blood to the characters children meet on the pages of classic and contemporary literature. The thought occurred to me as I watched scenes from the Thoreau play: how much better Soviet children will get to know not only the great American philosopher and civil libertarian but our history and our people after seeing the play.

The Leningrad Theater for Young Audiences was established in 1922. That same year the Delegates' Assembly or Children's Parliament, as it is often called, was set up. It has been actively functioning for half a century. Delegates are elected from every school in Leningrad (from 12 years of age to 17). The Assembly is divided into groups according to age. It is through these delegates that the theater not only mobilizes and influences the children but is **INFLUENCED BY THEM.** "These are our first critics," Stronin told me proudly. The complementary remarks as well as criticism are regularly presented in a variety of forms: the delegates meet regularly with actors, directors and, at times, with the writers; letters pour into the theater offices from the classrooms and homes; plays are discussed in the schools (the discussions are organized by the delegates). But, perhaps, the most graphic comments are those decorating the theater's lobby—paintings and drawings, giving their impressions of

the plays. It is through the Assembly that the close and interacting relations between school and theater are systematically maintained. It is through these young lovers of theater and critics that love for the theater is widely spread throughout the schools. There is nothing haphazard about composing the theater's repertoires. And it is hardly a one-way street with all the decisions being made by the theater's directors. On the contrary, the thinking and the needs of the youthful audience, particularly expressed through the Delegates' Assembly and based on constant study of the problems and needs of succeeding young generations, plays a great role in determining the theater's presentations. The theater maintains a pedagogical department composed of 6-7 teacher-psychologists and headed, as I noted, by Lada Surina who impressed me as being extremely sensitive to the problems as well as needs of succeeding generations. "Why do you need a pedagogical department?" I asked her. For a moment she appeared to be taken aback by my question. ("Doesn't every children's theater, especially in such an advanced country as the U.S., have one?" I could read in her surprised eyes.) "We have a special children's audience," she explained. "We have to know their tastes, what they like and what they do not like, and why. Moreover, each generation is different, with different tastes, different problems and different needs. How can we answer their needs if we do not keep pace with them?" She paused to see if her explanation was registering on me and continued: "Our failures, and we had them, could be largely attributed to a failure to keep abreast with our changing audiences, to our failure to remember that each generation develops in its own way. Thus, our actors, directors, our teachers consider it vital to maintain a fresh and continuing understanding of our children." The pedagogical department maintains a particularly close relationship with the Delegates' Assembly and the teachers in the schools. One of its main functions is to teach children

HOW to appreciate and EVALUATE all types of plays. Thus, it plays a specific role in developing the talent of audiences, in EDUCATING THEIR HEARTS.

A holiday spirit is created around the theater. The grandeur of the magnificent building, the art-gallery-like lobby, the imposing stage and circular auditorium that imparts a sense of intimacy to the large hall—everything ushers the children into a temple of beauty. The child's first day in the theater is transformed into a memorable event. The theater is specially decked up for the occasion and the new young theater-goers are escorted around, meet actors and are given autographed mementoes.

The Leningrad Theater for Young Audiences, as I noted, is linked with a studio that trains actors, directors and dancers. Korogodsky also heads the studio which is housed in an impressive building constructed in the classical Russian style of the 17th and 18th centuries. It was in the very room where we watched girls and boys of workers, collective farmers and intelligentsia go through their strenuous ballet examination that officers of the Moskovsky Regiment went off (after a ball) to take part in the Decembrist Uprising against the autocracy in 1825. From the dance class we went to the actors' studio. Here, too, the students of the second term (directors as well as actors and actresses) were being graded. Their test consisted of three parts: dramatization of four short stories of the remarkably talented Vassily Shukshin (he died in 1974) who was at one and the same time an excellent writer, actor and director; scenes from the play on Thoreau and a scene from Goethe's "Sorrows of Werther". I observed the first two. The same striving to achieve the highest artistic quality, the same devotion to *truth*, the same rejection of any playing down to young audiences that I had observed in rehearsals and in performances marked the work of the students. Many of the students were among those I saw in the rehearsals of "Boris" and in the performances in the evening. Soviet theater caters

to all generations. But, above all, it is directed toward the young. There are 47 children's theaters or theaters for young audiences (each republic except Tajikistan has at least one). Each performs in its national language. Then there are theaters which include two companies, one of which performs in Russian and the other in the national language. Such is the case in Alma-Ata (Kazakhstan), Kharkov (Ukraine), and Riga (Latvia). There are also theaters for young audiences which operate as two separate theaters, for example, the Georgian TYUZ and the Russian TYUZ in Tbilisi and the Uzbek and Russian TYUZes in Tashkent. In addition, there are theaters which are specially oriented toward youth, such as the Leninist Komsomol theaters in a number of cities. The Taganka and the Sovremennik theaters, though not designated as such, are actually youth theaters. But one can hardly stop at that: statistics show (and a visit to most Soviet theaters will demonstrate) that 70 per cent of the audience is composed of youth (under the age of 30). Thus, the overwhelming majority of Soviet theater-goers compose the most active section of the population. This underscores the significant role played by Soviet theater as a cultural and educational force in Soviet society.



## Moscow Theaters

Moscow's more than 25 dramatic, repertory theaters are characterized by variety and versatility. Each theater has its specific character based on its particular history and its own approach. (I will elaborate on this point later on.) What many of our bourgeois critics and correspondents decry as uniformity is the theater's common ideological position underlying all Soviet culture. Soviet theaters make no false claims to non-partisanship—the fictitious state with which many of our own creative people delude themselves. Soviet theater is very much partisan. Ever since the Great October Revolution it has been on the front-line in the struggle for socialism. The credo which has guided Soviet theater for more than half a century as well as today was summed up by Yevgeny Vakhtangov, one of the giants of the Russian and Soviet stage. Here are the ringing words of his manifesto: "The artist will be held responsible. . . . If the artist wishes to create something 'new', to engage in creative work after the advent of the Revolution, then he should create together with the people. Not for the people, not on their behalf, not from outside the people, but together

with them. The artist like Antaeus, needs the earth beneath his feet to give him strength to create something new, and to triumph. The people form this very earth."

These were not mere high-sounding phrases, these were and are the words Soviet theater lived and lives by. During the Civil War, the great Soviet poet Mayakovsky and other prominent writers organized the Theater of Revolutionary Satire (the Mayakovsky Theater springs from it) which staged plays right at the front. Actors fought not only with their art, but often with rifles. During the Great Patriotic War, 40,000 actors and actresses participated in fighting and performed at the front, in hospitals, in defense plants. Many lost their lives. Victor Rosov, prominent dramatist who was an actor at that time, turned to playwriting after he was severely wounded.

All Soviet theaters have close fraternal contacts with some large plant or enterprise. The Mossoviet Theater maintains such a relationship with the huge Ball-Bearing Plant No. 1 in Moscow and A. Viktorov, an outstanding worker of the plant who was elected to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union at the 24th Congress, is on the theater's Board. This is no mere formality as I discovered when I interviewed Viktorov. Viktorov revealed quite a profound understanding and a deep love for the theater. The Bolshoi Theater has close ties with the Moscow locomotive depot, which initiated the *subbotnik* in 1919. One of the most memorable "concerts" I ever attended was the one given by the Bolshoi at the plant during the *subbotnik* of 1969.

Theaters, as well as writers, poets, and dramatists, hold regular discussion meetings with their worker and collective farm audiences. The Donbas miners told me that at one such meeting miner-poets were discovered. And when the Moscow Art Theater put on its hit play "Steelworkers", with which I will deal at length later on, it not only organized a special performance for steelworkers but listened with keen attention to their reactions and

suggestions. The US equivalent of such contact with the people would be if Lincoln Center Theater staged a play about New York longshoremen and then discussed its merits and their performance with them. But that, unfortunately, is the farthest thing from the minds of our dramatists and theaters and, above all, the dominating investors. Many would consider such a relationship an infringement on their individual right of expression and creativity.

Soviet writers and artists, basing themselves on Vakh-tangov's credo, see no contradiction between COLLECTIVITY AND FULL INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY. In the first place, this is so because they themselves are products of a collective society. What may seem the norm for our writers and artists brought up in our dog-eat-dog society masking itself as a society of free individuals is regarded by most Soviet intelligentsia as the height of self-seeking and irresponsibility. Soviet theater is a theater immersed in the spirit of humanism, it is a theater of optimism, of confidence in man's future. It is a confidence that is based on the solid achievements reflected in socialist reality. No theater in the world has a richer store of traditions with which to replenish itself. The spirit of Chekhov, Ostrovsky, Tolstoy, Gorky and the great innovators—Stanislavsky, Nemirovich-Danchenko, Meyerhold, Okhlopkov, all of whom exerted so profound an influence on the US and world theater, hovers over the Soviet stage. Soviet theater, in its own way, is charting the path to new approaches as I shall show later on.

### **Taganka— Theater of Excitement**

Contrary to the myth of dull uniformity, I found Soviet theater to be vital, varied and versatile. Each theater has its own character, its specific approach and its particular

enthusiasts. What is more, it is permitted and encouraged to be itself. Let me start with the Taganka Theater.

The dark gray walls of the office of Yuri Lyubimov, its widely-known director, bear testimony to the international acclaim won by Moscow's popular Taganka Theater. Taganka's fans who scribbled their praise on its walls include Gus Hall, Eugene McCarthy, Arthur Miller, Laurence Olivier, Warren Beatty, and Walter Lowenfels. Miller's comments written in 1966 were amongst the most sweeping: "Once again the theater is saved!" he exclaimed. The word appearing most often on these walls of praise is "exciting". After spending three memorable weeks with the Taganka Theater during which I watched 12 of its 14 plays in that season's repertoire, sat in on a rehearsal and twice interviewed Lyubimov, I came to the conclusion that the word best describes this young theater. The Taganka is, above all, a theater of excitement. It is a revolutionary agitator with a clearly defined point of view, as its repertoire reveals. But it does not harangue or pamphleteer its audience. It assails their senses and arouses their emotions skilfully and artfully with all the overwhelming powers possessed by the theater. In the Taganka, as Kenneth Tynan, prominent British drama critic and one of the scribblers on the wall, wrote: "All the arts of the theater are on one stage." Bringing all the arts on one stage does not automatically produce good or exciting theater. In less skilful and less knowledgeable hands it could result in a mishmash of confusion. Skilful blending of the theater's arts requires a highly imaginative director who fully understands the inexhaustible flexibility of the stage, a well-trained company of thinking, dedicated actors and, not least of all, a competent staff of technicians. It requires a responsive, theatrically knowledgeable mass audience to verify the artistic result. All this the Taganka Theater has in abundance.

The Taganka owes much to Vsevolod Meyerhold, famous innovating Soviet director of the '20s and '30s, the



German genius Bertolt Brecht and, above all, to Lyubimov, its dynamic founder and teacher-director. In its present repertoire are two Brecht plays, "Galileo" and "Good Woman of Szechwan". The latter was the group's first play and launched the Taganka Theater on its spectacular career. The Taganka is a very young theater. It was organized by Lyubimov 12 years ago (it celebrated its 10th anniversary in 1973) on the basis of a fourth-term class of students at the Shchukin Studio (attached to the Vakhtangov Theater) taught by him. The actors and actresses are almost all under 30, and the audience they attract are largely youth. Thus, from the stage to the audience it is particularly a YOUTH THEATER. This characteristic in no small way accounts for much of the spirit of excitement that envelops you as soon as you enter it.

The theater whose full name is the Moscow Theater of Drama and Comedy on Taganka (the name of a public square on which it is situated) has an acting company of 50 and a total staff of 170. In appearance and theatrical style it's a sort of Soviet equivalent of our off-Broadway, in comparison to the more established theaters like the Moscow Art, Maly and Vakhtangov.

Lyubimov, a stocky, somewhat chubby, vigorous man of about 60, with steel gray hair and an extremely sensitive face, was an actor all his life and for many years was attached to the Vakhtangov Theater. He was a friend and admirer of Meyerhold—a miniature bust of the famous director occupies a prominent spot on Lyubimov's desk—as well as a close friend of the late poet and novelist Boris Pasternak. It is, above all, Lyubimov's concept of theater that has shaped the character of the Taganka. And Lyubimov's concepts are sharply defined and firmly held. He outlined them to me in his extremely alive study. "I like a theater of sharp problems, a theater that clearly expresses its world outlook, a people's theater, an open theater which mobilizes all the resources of the theater," Lyubimov stated. He believes Brecht "did a great deal

for the theater; he gave it a sharp political trend and enriched it in a publicist way". At the same time, Lyubimov emphasized, "Brecht placed many new aesthetic problems before the theater, one of the most important of which is the demand for a new actor. The actor of today has to know politics and must be intimately acquainted with the problems of his country." He paused and added, "All this means a new kind of art, demanding keen minds, actors who can think." Lyubimov's total theater demands versatility in talent as well as probing thought from his actors. Their tasks hardly end with the mastery of dialogue. From what I saw happen on the Taganka stage, they must be able to sing, dance, and mime as well.

After our talk with Lyubimov, I had the pleasure of seeing his concepts come to life on the Taganka stage. They are, perhaps, most excitingly realized in Lyubimov's dramatization of John Reed's immortal reportage of the Russian Revolution, "Ten Days That Shook the World". Much of the laudatory scribbling on Lyubimov's wall is a result of the overwhelming impressions produced by this extraordinary play which is more a brilliant panorama of the October Revolution than a play. And, like that Revolution, it crosses all frontiers, bridges, all language barriers. Here, Lyubimov's concept of total theater literally begins at the theater entrance. The play commences the moment you enter the lobby. Your ticket is taken by a Red Guard, who places it on his bayonet. A trio of Red sailors and soldiers clad in the uniforms of those early revolutionary days recreates, with a soul-stirring song and accordion, the fresh world-shaking spirit of the immortal Ten Days. Characters perched on an improvised stage in the lobby introduce themselves in rollicking song. Thus the mood is set before you even take your seat. You are ready for the "collection". And the "collection" pitch set in the lobby mounts in intensity on the stage. Though based on Reed's book, the play, as are most of the Taganka Theater's productions, is freely adapted by Lyubimov

with the assistance of other members of his staff. The script serves largely as the theatrical blue print for the mobilization of the full resources of the theater, not only for the action on the stage but in the entire theater. Unlike Reed's book, a reading of the script alone would not get you very far. Lyubimov's adapted scripts, unlike well-made plays, are intended for the stage—or rather the entire theater, not the reading room. The flame-like hands of the Revolution (a masterpiece of theatrical achievement), with which the play begins and ends, are as important "actors" as the declaiming performers. Dialogue as such, is only a part, and often not the most significant part, of what happens on the stage. The hero is the people, the Revolution, and the glorious triumph emerging out of the turmoil, confusion and suffering of those Ten Days are depicted in Eisenstein-like crowd scenes, vaudevillian skits and punctuated by Lenin's illuminating prophetic words. All this is difficult enough to achieve on the screen and quite a feat to accomplish on a small stage. The unseen technicians who create the fog enveloping the stage in the atmosphere of history, whose skilful play of lights made memorable the flaming hands of the revolution, deserve considerable commendation. They are an extremely important element in the Taganka Theater.

"The face of a theater is, in the first place, determined by its repertoire," Lyubimov told me. In that sense Taganka's "face" is clearly defined. It is the face of the socialist revolution, of Russian revolutionary and democratic tradition, of passionate Russian and Soviet poets; it is the face of man's age-old struggle against the forces of regression and repression and for "light and freedom", as one of the verses in a stirring song in Lyubimov's dramatization of Chernishevsky's "What Is to Be Done?" proclaims. Besides "Ten Days", which has been played for 12 years, and the two Brecht plays mentioned above, Taganka's repertoire includes "Listen", a powerful protest against bureaucracy and conservatism, based on

Mayakovsky's poems and his biography; dramatizations of Sergei Yessenin's poem-play "Pugachev" and Andrei Voznesensky's "Anti-Worlds"; Gorky's "Mother"; poems by Soviet poets—"The Living and the Dead"; Molière's "Tartuffe"; "Rush Hour", a play by Polish dramatist Erzy Broszkiewicz; "Under the Shadow of the Statue of Liberty", a powerful montage dramatization of poems by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, giving his perceptive impressions of the US; "The Dawns are Quiet Here", a highly acclaimed play by Boris Vassilyev, presenting an extremely moving account of the tragic fate of a young women's anti-aircraft group during the Great Patriotic War; and Lyubimov's interpretation of "Hamlet". Vassilyev's play has also been adapted for the cinema and opera.

The Taganka Theater, as one would expect, is quite at home with Brecht. The production of "Galileo" I saw was sharper in its presentation of Brecht's anti-religious, anti-church shafts than what I saw in New York's Lincoln Center, though I felt the portrayal of Galileo was not on an equal level. Try to imagine this scene on a Broadway stage: the Pope, conniving with his advisors on how to force Galileo to recant, is seated on his throne in his underwear. The Pope is ceremoniously decked with a layer upon layer of imposing ceremonial robes as the plot is hatched. Throughout the play the smell of incense pervades the theater. An awesome picture of the power of darkness of the church in those times is drawn. From the sides of the stage an intermittent duel in song takes place between the forces of darkness—somber chanting monks, and the forces of light—the voices of hopeful innocent children. Two versions are presented as conclusions. One—an anti-hero version of a Galileo not only overcome by his weaknesses but grovelling before them, more concerned with a piece of roasted goose than his scientific concepts. The other presents a Galileo who realizes he underestimated his superior strength out of fear for his personal safety.



"The Good Woman of Szechwan" deservedly launched the Taganka Theater into popularity. Brecht's wise mocking philosophic play on the dangers of being kind in the capitalist world are portrayed with delightfully deft fantasy and with tongue-in-cheek. A particularly fine performance is given by Zinaida Slavina, who plays the two sides of the Good Woman with just the right Brechtian touches. Brecht's direct thrusts against the capitalist system, soft-pedalled in our country, hit home in the Taganka. At the conclusion the actors raise their fists in salute.

Gorky's "Mother" achieves its powerfully moving qualities largely through its crowd scenes. This time the making of the Revolution, rather than the Ten Days, fills the stage and the theater. Revolutionary songs interlaced throughout the play give it opera-like qualities and impart to the crowd scenes some of the epic quality of Moussorgsky's people's choruses. However, I felt, Mother, as the unforgettable character Gorky created, is overshadowed by the crowd scenes.

The Taganka's and Lyubimov's strength lies in the mobilization of total theater. This is the hallmark of this dynamic theater. But its strength, in my opinion, also gives rise to a weakness. There are times and there are plays when something less and, at times, a good deal less, than total theater are better suited for the purpose. Portrayal of a few characters in depth, rather than sweeping dramatic crowd scenes and movement, at times can give opportunities for more profound character development and deeper insight into the problems and the times. This does not seem to be Taganka's particular style. And one can say with justification that that approach is more than served by many of Moscow's other theaters—let the Taganka concentrate on its own new, invigorating theater. But at times there can be too much of a good thing—even for Taganka.

And there are cases when Lyubimov's extraordinary

imagination and innovating spirit do not quite hit the mark. I felt this in regard to "Hamlet". It was a case of too much Lyubimov to feel the full depth of Shakespeare's masterpiece. If anything, "Hamlet" demands profound CHARACTER portrayal, rather than sound effects and impressive props. This was not the approach I felt in Lyubimov's production. But even with its occasional misses, the Taganka has a batting average any theater would be proud of.

The Taganka Theater, as with all innovating forces, has its Soviet critics, as well as enthusiastic followers. But all Soviet theater people and Soviet citizens to whom I spoke, including those who cannot be counted as its enthusiasts, welcome the Taganka as a new and vigorous voice in Soviet theater and take deep pride in the acclaim it has won from international personalities.

The desire for closer contact with Soviet theaters and the realization of the mutual benefit such a relationship can produce, was impressed upon me by the reaction of Douglas Turner Ward, director of the Negro Ensemble Theater, playwright and actor. His attendance at the 15th Congress of the International Theater Institute marked Ward's first visit to the Soviet Union and his first direct contact with Soviet theater. Ward was particularly impressed by the Taganka Theater (among other reasons, the Taganka, which stresses visual and total theater, is easier for those with little or no knowledge of Russian to understand). Ward was enthusiastic and exclaimed: "Oh, if only a group of our actors and directors could study with the Taganka and Lyubimov for one month! What a great help that would be to us!" For the Taganka is what the Negro Ensemble Theater is trying to be. "Just take the facilities I saw at the Taganka's disposal," Ward continued, "just the lighting. We could never afford that!" The Negro Ensemble which gets some kind of subsidy from the Ford Foundation, has to struggle to meet its rent bill and exists from hand to mouth. No wonder Ward and

others of the US theater delegation, whatever reservations they may have had on theatrical form and style, regarded the firm substantial status of Soviet theater, its enthusiastic and full audiences, the security and artistic versatility of Soviet actors, with envy.

### **Sovremennik— Theater of Problems**

If the Taganka is a theater of excitement, the Sovremennik, also a young Soviet theater, is a theater of a more probing, though less exciting, approach to problems. Its relationship with the Taganka is close, even if it differs creatively in its approach to the stage. The Sovremennik preceded the Taganka in stimulating the development of contemporary Soviet drama. Its very name means "contemporary". It was housed in a rather attractive building on Mayakovsky Square, the heart of Moscow's theater district, with an auditorium seating 800. Today it has a newly-constructed building. The Sovremennik has a staff of 200, including 45 actors. But it was described to me as "one of Moscow's smallest theaters" by its 45-year-old managing director Oleg Tabakov. Tabakov is a charming gentle looking man who, like many prominent Soviet actors, is also kept busy playing in films. He and Galina Volchek, the artistic director, who very effectively staged "Ascent to Mount Fuji", form a formidable team. Oleg Yefremov, now artistic director of the Moscow Art Theater, formerly occupied that position in the Sovremennik.

If the Taganka was born out of the Vakhtangov Theater, the Sovremennik grew out of the Moscow Art Theater. It was founded in 1956, by a group of the Moscow Art Theater actors gathered around Yefremov. The Sovremennik was one of the cultural blossoms of the historic 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Tabakov told me. "We are students and, we think,

continuator of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko. And our goal is to develop creatively their great traditions," he said softly. "In what way does your theater differ from the Taganka?" I asked. Tabakov smiled, thought a moment and replied: "The Taganka is imaginative thinking. It is a very aggressive theater. The Taganka addresses itself to the audience directly. We do not appeal directly to our audience. We demand from them only one thing—that they THINK and that they choose their position AFTER SOBER THOUGHT. We await deeper understanding from our spectators and strive for mutual understanding on the part of actor, dramatist and audience on contemporary problems." The Sovremennik, Tabakov stated, concentrates on the actor and on developing a close working relationship between actor and author. This theater works especially closely with a number of contemporary Soviet playwrights, among them Victor Rozov, four of whose plays were in that season's repertoire. One of them, "The Eternally Alive", was made into a film "The Cranes Are Flying" and was well received in the US. I met and interviewed Rozov when he visited the US in 1967. I saw eight plays out of the 12 in Sovremennik's 1973 repertoire. Rozov's "The Eternally Alive" is considerably sharper than the film in depicting those who in this period of severest trial, were above all concerned with their own petty lives. The play vividly portrays characters who represent the mass of Soviet people, the quiet, suffering but triumphant heroes who saved mankind as well as their country from the horrors of fascism. It is a humanistic cry against war which "not only kills physically but INSIDE"! "They are the worst dead, the most terribly killed (those who are killed inside)!" one of the characters in the play exclaims. The Soviet Union's 20 million dead are "eternally alive", while these are living dead.

Rozov and the Sovremennik hold a mirror to Soviet citizens and compel them to THINK about problems. The



plays are hard-hitting and real and the acting is extremely effective. One look at the audience and I could see that what Tabakov referred to as one of the main goals of his theater was being achieved. However, the plays I saw in 1973 did not adequately reflect the main struggle of millions of Soviet people—the struggle for the construction of Communism and the problems that come with that vast effort. Sovremennik's 1974 repertoire includes "Weather for Tomorrow", a play dealing with the auto workers of Togliatti, the Soviet Detroit, by Mikhail Shatrov. Its 1974 season, generally, introduced a number of hard-hitting plays which I shall discuss later on.

Perhaps the most compelling of Sovremennik's productions is the trilogy of plays, each by a different playwright, summing up the three great stages of Russian and Soviet history in the victorious march to the October Revolution. They are "The Decembrists" by Leonid Zorin, "Narodovoltsi" (Narodniki) by Alexander Svobodin, and "Bolsheviks" by Mikhail Shatrov. Lenin noted the historical connection between these diverse movements. The Decembrists, enlightened members of the nobility and landlord classes of Russia who were influenced by the French Revolution, planted the seeds of democratic awakening. The Narodniki, by their revolutionary agitation and propaganda, widened the ties with the people. But the Narodniki movement, Lenin pointed out, "was not the storm itself". It was left to Lenin and the Bolsheviks to give this explosive revolutionary storm its proletarian direction. From the two plays I saw, "Decembrists" and "Bolsheviks", this historical development is effectively dramatized. These periods of Russian history come alive in the flesh and blood characters who made that history. Particularly appealing are the portrayals of the Bolsheviks. Most Americans, fed on decades of slanderous caricatures, picture Bolsheviks as ruthless, inhuman conspirators for whom human life was of little consequence. Shatrov's Bolsheviks, (modeled after well-known historical figures of that

period) are warm, idealistic human beings. The play (subtitled, "The 30th of August") deals with that terrible day when Lenin, severely wounded by an assassin's bullet, struggled for his life. The scenes, vividly staged, take place in the cabinet of the ministers of the newly-born Soviet government. Lenin is never seen though he fights for his life in an adjoining room while grief-stricken Nadezhda Krupskaya and Lenin's sister sit nearby, anxiously awaiting medical reports. A telegraph apparatus, back stage, provides connection with the outside world. Off-stage, mass meetings of dazed and angry workers can be heard adopting resolutions "demanding that Lenin lives".

At first, the Bolsheviks are paralyzed by this terrible blow and can only focus their hearts and minds on the room nearby. It is Yakov Sverdlov, first chairman of the Soviet Government, who first overcomes these feelings of bottomless loss and helplessness. "The Socialist Revolution cannot depend on any one person no matter how great he is," Sverdlov tells himself as much as his comrades. The attempted assassination of Lenin, which took place the same day another Bolshevik leader, Uritsky, was killed, was the signal for vastly intensified efforts at sabotage, terror and counter-revolution on the part of all the enemies of the young Soviet state, which, like Lenin, was struggling for its life. Thus, the Bolshevik ministers were confronted with the urgent need to take strong measures to counter White terror with Red terror. It is on this question that the main debate in the play takes place. It is here, in the resolution of this crucial question—how to defend a gravely threatened Revolution, that the qualities of firmness and flexibility and, above all, deep humanity of the Bolsheviks emerge. Lenin, the model Bolshevik, hovers in spirit over the debate. Pressures for either extreme—to unleash unrestrained counter-terror or to avoid the challenge in the name of a classless concern for humanity—are rejected. "Terror against the enemy must never be permitted to get out of hand. It must never be

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used against our comrades and our friends," Sverdlov warns as he and others point to the lessons of the French Revolution. All unanimously agree and adopt a resolution with firm safeguards against excesses. The debate on how to defend the Revolution from its enemies has considerable significance in the light of the excesses which arose during the period of the personality cult of Stalin. The firm but human approach taken by the Bolsheviks in a moment of great crisis packs a powerful dramatic lesson.

Sovremennik actors excellently depict the Bolsheviks. Sverdlov, Lunacharsky, Tchicherin, Kollontai and many others emerge as warm human beings beautiful in their concern for each other. Tabakov and Yefremov (who perform in the trilogy), incidentally, reveal themselves as splendid actors as well as directors. This versatility in the theater is demonstrated in the Sovremennik as it is in all theaters I visited in the ease with which actors play diverse roles in the matter of days.

Tabakov was right. You do leave his theater, thinking. Though in the case of the "Bolsheviks", we also ended up singing the "Internationale" with the tear-stained cast who softly sang that revolutionary hymn when the news came that Lenin would live. Lenin was very much alive in the Sovremennik.

### **Vakhtangov Theater— Theater of Holiday Spirit**

I asked Yevgeny Simonov, director of Moscow's celebrated Vakhtangov Academic Theater, to tell me what characteristics particularly distinguished his theater. Simonov, a youngish looking man with gray hair, did not hesitate for a reply. "Ours is a theater of happiness, a theater of the holiday spirit." His eyes sparkled as if to give emphasis to his words. The impressive, huge, three-

storied, columned building on old Arbat St. which houses the theater suggests the spirit of optimism. A walk through the artistically furnished interior with its innumerable rooms, elaborate library, immense stage, and 1,800-seat hall is like a tour through an art museum in scope as well as structure. The Vakhtangov is an institution as well as a theater. It has 84 actors, among the finest in the Soviet Union, and a staff of 400. It is an academic theater which means it meets the highest theatrical standards. Its famous Shchukin institute, named after its renowned actor, Boris Shchukin, celebrated for creating the role of Lenin, trains actors not only for its own needs, but provides many Moscow and Soviet theaters with talented performers. The concept of the theater of happiness was born on November 13, 1921, at a time when the infant socialist state was in the grip of famine and was just emerging from the fires of the Civil War and foreign armed intervention. It was the concept of Yevgeny Vakhtangov, one of the great figures of Russian theater, a follower of Stanislavsky. Vakhtangov whole-heartedly embraced the October Revolution and, as I noted earlier, called on Russian artists to "create, not in the name of the people but WITH the people", in his famous manifesto. Himself quite ill at the time (he died in 1922 at the age of 39), Vakhtangov staged Carlo Gozzi's delightful fairy tale, "Princess Turandot", in the joyous spirit of the Italian Comedia del Arté. With hunger stalking the streets, Vakhtangov's actors strode on the stage dressed in evening clothes. And ragged Moscovites roared at the clownish humor as they soared into the happy future with the performers. Generations of Soviet citizens since were brought up on this fairy tale which has acquired symbolic significance. I saw "Princess Turandot", and though I must honestly say that for me it hardly fulfilled the expectations raised, the gay laughter of the audience indicated that the more than 50 year glow was still there for Soviet theater-goers. Soviet people love fairy tales.

The Vakhtangov is a theater of A VARIETY of theatrical forms. Vakhtangov believed the magic of the theater lay in the never-ending effort to discover the particular form each play required to make it come to life. Ruben Simonov, winner of the Lenin Prize, who succeeded him and directed the theater for 30 years until his death in 1968, continued and developed these Vakhtangov traditions. Ruben's son, Yevgeny, from what I saw, is seeking to further advance them. The Vakhtangov's history is closely associated with the half-century history of the Soviet Union and Soviet theater. It was the first to stage a play depicting Lenin "The Man With the Rifle", by Nikolai Pogodin.

The Vakhtangov is a theater not only of a variety of forms, but of extremely versatile actors. I saw the extraordinary versatility of Vakhtangov players demonstrated in action both as individuals and as a collective. I was particularly impressed by the ease and skill with which the entire company moved from the wisp-like fantasy of "Turandot", to the elemental fury of Babel's heroic Cossack-peasant-worker "Mounted Army", to the epic folk-like portrayal of the Russian Revolution in "The Man With the Rifle", to Dostoyevsky's probing, psychological, philosophic tragedy, the "Idiot". I was especially able to observe the Vakhtangov's remarkably wide range of theatrical powers because I saw the shift from one style to another in a matter of days. I watched fascinated, as Mikhail Ulyanov convincingly portrayed Lenin only to become transformed a few days later into the maniacal brooding Rogozhin, in the "Idiot". Similarly, I marveled as Yulia Borissova moved with equal ease from the role of a simple servant-girl in "The Man With the Rifle", to Nastassia Filippovna, one of the most complex characters in literature and as Nikolai Gritsenko similarly shifted from the clown in "Turandot" to the Christ-like Prince Myshkin in the "Idiot". Where the Taganka's strength lies in mustering total resources of the theater on one

stage, the Vakhtangov's lies in its ability to create MANY stages, its mastery of many theatrical forms. Both, in different ways, achieve the same objective—the expansion of the theater's powers.

The Vakhtangov Theater's unforgettable presentation of the "Idiot" particularly reveals its extraordinary theatrical capacity. Dostoyevsky would have rejoiced in the deep feeling and reverence with which the atheistic Soviet theater recreated his parable of the saintly Prince whose love for people was too pure for the corrupt and tormented Russia of the Tsars. Gritsenko's masterful portrayal of Prince Myshkin demonstrated the depth of characterization as well as versatility typical of the Vakhtangov actors. From the moment the Christ-like Prince appears to the final agonizing moment when he is thrust back into idiocy as a result of his harrowing experiences with the tsarist world there is a warm incandescent glow on the Vakhtangov stage. Gritsenko literally radiates spiritual beauty. You are in the presence of that innocent, yet tragically wise, child-like goodness the pursuit of which led man to create a God and Dostoyevsky to create a Prince Myshkin and an Alyosha in "The Karamazov Brothers". The overwhelmingly atheistic Soviet audience was drawn to Dostoyevsky's God-like hero because, in the final analysis, building a society of the good is what constructing communist society and molding communist man is all about.

The Vakhtangov has its distinctive approach to the theater. Where the Taganka Theater's "Ten Days That Shook the World" literally lifts you out of your seat; the Vakhtangov's "The Man With the Rifle" achieves a similar objective at a slower pace and in a considerably less spectacular fashion. Both capture the freshness and never-to-be repeated excitement of the birth of the October Revolution. The Vakhtangov uses poignant moments of silence on the stage with the same kind of effectiveness the Taganka makes use of total theater. The silence that



descends on the stage, as Alexander Grave portraying Shadrin in "The Man With the Rifle" gazes at the bread handed to him by his Red soldier comrades and slowly eats it while they look on, is overpowering. A similar moving effect is created when Mikhail Ulyanov, as Lenin, sits alone, chin in hand, thinking, after a tempestuous day at Smolny, the headquarters of the Revolution. A moving picture of a man who feels the loneliness of epochal responsibility, emerges.

Babel's rough illiterate Red Cavalrymen transformed into crusading heroes by the magic touch of the October Revolution are vividly alive on the Vakhtangov stage. The poignancy, earthy humor and revolutionary sweep of Babel's finely chiselled prose are matched in movement and gesture of every characterization, even in those characters who appear for a fleeting moment. The wonderful, exhilarating turbulence of war-weary soldiers given their indomitable second wind by the breath of the Revolution, throbs on the stage. Babel's unlettered heroes, who stormed the heavens and opened the doors to an unprecedented cultural revolution, pulsate with life. They are unidealized heroes who are all the more moving for their honest imperfections. The tenderness, childlike openness and genuine kindness, stifled in them by the brutal tsarist existence, blossomed in the comradeship of revolutionary battle. The contrast between the open-hearted crudeness of the revolutionary Cossacks and the coldly calculated deceit of the cultured White Guard is forcefully depicted in the scene where the Polish officer, posing as a priest, doffs his clerical robe and signals a White Guard to shoot a Red Cavalryman in the back. Only a few moments before, the naive Cavalryman and his comrades had invited the "priest" to dine with them.

Thus, in scope and style, the Vakhtangov is many theaters. Few theaters in the world would dare attempt, let alone portray in sheer number as well as diversity and complexity, the kind of plays the Vakhtangov considers

to be a "normal" seasonal repertoire. Its 1973 repertoire of 24 plays included, besides those mentioned, Molière's "Bourgeois Gentleman", George Bernard Shaw's "The Millionairess", Emil Zola's "Trap", Pushkin's "Little Tragedies" and a large number of plays by modern Soviet dramatists, among them Alexander Korneichuk's "Memory of a Heart", Leonid Zorin's "Warsaw Melody", Yevgeny Schwarz's "Cinderella", Boris Pasternak's translation of Shakespeare's "Anthony and Cleopatra", (starring Borisova and Ulyanov), and "Situation" by Victor Rozov.

It is perhaps this extraordinary range of theatrical form and versatility of its actors that particularly distinguishes this "theater of happiness".

### Mayakovsky Theater— Theater of Many Faces

The Mayakovsky Theater, whose history dates back to 1919, is a theater which in its lifetime has had many faces. It also has had many names. It only received its present name in 1954, the year of the Mayakovsky jubilee, marking the 60th anniversary of the great poet's birth. Today it is an academic theater with 82 actors and a staff of 250-300. As the Theater of Revolutionary Satire it was born on the Vitebsk (Byelorussia) front in the grim days of the Civil War. It was a theater of agitators and satirists. Its mission—to use the weapon of ridicule to cut down to size White Guard would-be-Napoleons like General Denikin, to destroy the centuries old myth of the all-powerful might of the tsarist rulers. Its actors not only fought with ridicule but, when necessary, with guns.

In 1920, with the victory over the foreign armed intervention and counter-revolution secured, the Theater of Revolutionary Satire left the front to establish itself in Moscow. If earlier it played for the soldiers of the Rev-

olution, now it addressed itself to its workers. In 1921 it became the only repertory theater in Moscow and moved into its present home, an impressive light comedy theater, constructed in 1887, which once entertained Moscow's nobility and élite. The director indignantly left for abroad when the ownership and audience changed so drastically.

The real creative history of the Mayakovsky Theater began on October 29, 1922, when it became the Theater of Revolutionary History with famous Meyerhold as its head. Meyerhold directed the theater for two years and for many years profoundly influenced its course. The sharp artistically agitational theater of the revolution flourished. Alexei Popov, who was the theater's director in 1930 laid emphasis on contemporary themes. The theater's literary department at the time was headed by the very talented Nikolai Pogodin, the author of "The Man With the Rifle", one of the classics of Soviet theater. Meyerhold mainly staged revolutionary plays, while Popov revived Russian and world classics and gave them a fresh contemporary ring. The year 1935 saw the third Soviet production of "Romeo and Juliet". The plays of the great Russian dramatist A. N. Ostrovsky were performed. From 1935 to 1942 the theater was headed by another great figure of the Soviet stage, Andrei Lobanov. Lobanov was the teacher of Andrei Goncharov, the present director who assumed the leadership of the theater in 1968. Lobanov further stressed contemporary theater and staged Alexei Arbusov's well-known play "Tanya". But perhaps the most significant and most vivid period in the Mayakovsky Theater's history began in 1942 when Nikolai Okhlopkov became its director. Okhlopkov did much to give the Mayakovsky Theater its own distinctive style at a time when many theaters sought to model themselves along the lines of the celebrated Moscow Art Theater.

Okhlopkov, like many others in the Mayakovsky and other Moscow theaters, was a student of Meyerhold. Like Lobanov, Okhlopkov put emphasis on psycholog-

ical portrayal. Okhlopkov combined the sweep of the crowd scene with the concentration on a deep probing of individual character. And he sought to widen the dimensions of both by extending the flexibility of the modern stage. The classic coexisted with the contemporary, "Hamlet" and "Medea" occupied the same stage as Fadeyev's immortal "Young Guard". The Mayakovsky Theater's history in miniature mirrors the history of Soviet theater. Born in battle, it struggled to inherit and interpret the great past as it turned its efforts towards reflecting its revolutionary present. More, it strove to bring them into one harmonious creative whole. Its stage virtually enacted all the stages in the development of Soviet theater.

The Mayakovsky is among those theaters which stress the all important role of the actor. Goncharov, its middle-aged, heavy set genial director, smiled as we discussed problems of the theater today. The contemporary theater, he noted, is now widely viewed as the theater of the director. But, he stressed, "the director directs through the souls of the actors". It is "character", the probing portrayal of man's soul, that, above all, makes theater, he pointed out. Staging, employment of the most effective forms, must, in the final analysis, serve to deepen the actor's interpretation of character. Goncharov was critical of directors who in their pursuit of the total mastery of the theater's powers (and he believes that is essential) "pay insufficient attention to the development of the actors". Four of the plays I saw differed considerably in theme and style. "Children of Vanyushin", a Russian classic by Naidyonov, a playwright little known in our country (many great Russian writers, including Chernyshevsky, Ostrovsky and even Pushkin are, unfortunately, little known in the US), deals with the conflict of generations, a theme that provides much material for the contemporary, as well as the classic play. The production is quite modern and flexible. A revolving stage, adding a note of fantasy, shifts scenes and characters as if on a



merry-go-round. Pauses are punctuated with nostalgic haunting tunes played off-stage by balalaikas. Billboards and advertisements of tsarist days adorn the stage. You are transported into the Russia of the 1880s, but you are conscious throughout that you are viewing the family scene of days gone by with the contemporary eye. "Upstairs", the world of Vanyushin's children, and "downstairs", the world of *papa* and *mama*, are, indeed, two different worlds. The Soviet audience seemed to view with deep sympathy and understanding the painful gap that divided the generations of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers. The gap has largely disappeared, but enough of it still remains so that one could also sense a personal interest. There are still some of the problems of Vanyushin's children in all of us. Yevgeny Leonov, as *papa*, H. Ter-Ossipyan, as *mama*, and Alexander Lazarev, as the pompous oldest son who takes over the family business, are particularly effective.

Ostrovsky's "Talents and Admirers" is a passionate protest against a corrupt society's ravishment of its beautiful and creative young. Ostrovsky's cry of outrage against seduction of its talented can well echo in Hollywood and Broadway today. The aged lecherous rich who flock around the beautiful actress Alexandra Negin (sensitive played by Yekaterina Gradova) have their counterparts in our "sugar daddies". Talent was, indeed, a heavy burden to bear in the Russia of Ostrovsky when its implementation was in the hands of rich admirers who at a "price" would finance its development. One sensed that the Soviet actors and actresses, particularly, felt this tragedy of their ancestors. The Mayakovsky Theater's actors were the living expression of the liberation of the talented from the debasing exploitation by their "admirers". Particularly moving was the farewell toast to talent and beauty offered by Maxim Straukh, as the old assistant director who discovered Alexandra's talent only to see it ravished by a coldly calculating admirer. Straukh, a vet-

eran Mayakovsky performer, was the first actor to play Lenin on the screen in "The Man With the Rifle" (Straukh passed away in 1974). Talents and their admirers enact their lives on an old Russian stage. We see the actors waiting to make their entries. An air of whimsical make-believe only serves to heighten the sordid reality.

"The End of Book Six" by the Polish playwright Erzy Brozkiewicz deals with the determined efforts of Copernicus, famous Polish astronomer of the 15th-16th centuries to outmanoeuvre the church in order to complete his famous work proving that the earth and all other planets revolve around the sun. Inevitably, one is reminded of Brecht's treatment of a similar theme in his play "Galileo". But comparisons would be unfair. Brozkiewicz, to be sure, is not Brecht, but his play can stand on its own feet as a probing of an inexhaustible theme—man's invincible struggle to reveal the truth, to KNOW. The Mayakovsky Theater's production differs from the Taganka's portrayal of Galileo, but it is original and imaginative in its own way. The action and the conflict between the men of the church and the men of science take place on two levels. On the lower level, the stage itself—an ageing Copernicus, himself a man of the church, who is determined to complete his Book Six at all costs. He suffers humiliation and insults as he refuses to be diverted from his goal. He refuses to come to the aid of a fellow-seeker of truth about to be put to death by the church and is spat on by the man's angry disillusioned wife. Above, perched in his menacing mediaeval cubicle, the Bishop Johan IV watches and receives reports from his spies on Copernicus' every move. Man's mission on earth, the church tells Copernicus, is not to KNOW but to BELIEVE. At the conclusion of the play, after the audience applauded the actors, the Bishop and Copernicus have their final say. Above all, Copernicus sums up, man is eternally determined to "KNOW A LITTLE MORE". The play throughout is an exciting contest and debate punctuated by barbs of

bitter humor. Here as in the other theaters I visited, I met the same actors in four different roles in the course of little more than a week. V. Samoilov, People's Artist of the Russian Federation, who was the chief engineer in "Maria" three days before, forcefully portrayed the determined Copernicus.

In "The Rout", based on Alexander Fadeyev's well-known novel, the Mayakovsky troupe skilfully combines fantasy and reality. What emerges is a poetic tribute to the unschooled, semi-literate masses who made and defended the Revolution. In Levinson (sensitively portrayed by Armen Dzhigarkhanyan) the near-blind, sick commissar who conceals his illness to give courage and confidence to an entrapped partisan detachment a moving characterization of a Bolshevik is drawn. "The Rout" packs a powerful political lesson. The "pure", "super"-revolutionary student youth, who looks down upon his crude, politically unschooled comrades, alone fails to meet the test when the chips are down. Earlier, in a dramatic debate with Levinson, the student derides the partisans, scathingly noting all their weaknesses. How can the Revolution be made with such material, he sneeringly asks Levinson. Levinson points to the unspoken heroism of his men, who with all their gripes and breaches of discipline, fight the combined forces of the White Guard and Japanese invaders in the Far East taiga. Revolution is not made by pure people who merely proclaim their high ideals but by real heroes like his partisans whose self-sacrificing deeds usher in the New World, Levinson exclaims. Levinson's words are given immortal life in the death of Morozko, one of the partisans, the student, mainly, scoffed at. It is Morozko who sacrifices his life to fire the warning shots to alert his comrades when the "pure" revolutionary refuses to do this and runs off into the forest.

The plays I saw demonstrated the Mayakovsky Theater's flexibility of theatrical form and preoccupation with character development. The Mayakovsky is a theater in

search of the new in the classics as well as in the contemporary. It does not seem to be wed to a particular style or school. And under Goncharov, it appears to exhibit a particular interest in US plays. As former director of Moscow's Malaya Bronnaya Theater, Goncharov was one of the first to stage Arthur Miller's "A View From the Bridge", in 1956. He met Miller at the time. Goncharov is anxious to present his version of "For Whom the Bell Tolls", Ernest Hemingway's novel on the Spanish Civil War. The Mayakovsky Theater's repertoire includes the US musical hit, "The Man of La Mancha" (a hit here too) and Tennessee Williams "Street Car Named Desire."

### **The Mother of Russian and Soviet Theater**

The Moscow Art Theater is the "mother of the Russian and Soviet theater", Oleg Yefremov, its present dynamic and imaginative director, told me. (In 1973 it celebrated its 75th anniversary.) Yefremov, who struck me as extremely Russian himself in the open-hearted manner with which he discussed his theater, should know. He was one of its many prominent children. History of the Russian theater, indeed, hovered over us. The imposing stage curtain bears the "chaika" (the sea-gull) of Chekhov's famous play which has since symbolized the theater. Busts of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, its founding directors and the "fathers" of the Russian stage, stand guard in the impressive anteroom. Yefremov stressed the incubating role of the Art Theater's studios as he pointed out that it was Meyerhold who initiated the studio concept. The studio is more than a school for actors; it is, above all, the laboratory for EXPERIMENTATION AND INNOVATION—for expanding the limitless possibilities of the stage. Thus, it was not by chance that the



Moscow Art Theater's studios launched many of the most prominent Soviet directors and actors into their fruitful careers. Among them Oleg Yefremov, Oleg Tabakov and Anatoly Efros. The Sovremennik, Yefremov noted, is "modern Moscow Art Theater in miniature". The Vakhtangov Theater grew out of studio number two. A great theater is, above all, known for the new path it charted, the great plays and playwrights it gave to the world, its innovating directors and unforgettable actors and actresses. Few theaters in the world can match the Moscow Art's contributions in this respect. The Moscow Art Theater is the theater of Chekhov and Gorky. On its hallowed stage such world classics as "The Sea-Gull", "Three Sisters", "Cherry Orchard", "Uncle Vanya" and "The Lower Depths" came to life. If the Moscow Art Theater was born with Chekhov, the great Russian humanist, it was reborn with Gorky, the stormy bard of the socialist revolution. Gorky, as Stanislavsky noted, "initiated the theater's socio-political line". As for charting a new path—the theater accomplished a veritable revolution on the stage. This was dramatically demonstrated with its very first production, the epochal performance in 1898 of "Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich", by A. K. Tolstoy, which I will deal with in detail in another chapter. A great humanist spirit, given overwhelming power by the force of realism and artistry, imparted a new dimension to the stage.

The Moscow Art was much more than a theater; it was a great social force that made its contribution in preparing the ground for the revolutionary storms to come. The anguished but hopeful cry of the Three Sisters and Satin's ringing ode to Man in the midst of the lower depths of Tsarist capitalist society reverberated throughout awakening Russia. For such a theater new methods and a new approach were demanded. Thus was born the "Stanislavsky method", which not only trained generations of famous Russian actors and actresses, but to this day profoundly affects our own stage and cinema. For this, our theater

and screen are greatly indebted to the Moscow Art as well as Stanislavsky (one cannot imagine one without the other). It was Gorky who summed up the theater's meaning when he declared that the Moscow Art was of the same order and significance as the Tretyakov Gallery, St. Basil's Cathedral and all the best that Moscow has to offer. That Lenin agreed with Gorky was demonstrated in the great personal care taken by the founder of the first socialist state to preserve and strengthen the theater and to aid its artists in the difficult days when the Revolution was still fighting for its life. Lenin said that if there was a theater which had to be salvaged from the past and preserved at all costs, it was the Moscow Art Theater.

The Moscow Art Theater was not only preserved. The principles that guided its founders, which could only be implemented in a very limited way in pre-revolutionary years, were given life in a way its founders could only dream of. Stanislavsky had stated that the aim of the theater he and Nemirovich-Danchenko had established, was to create the first rational, ethical theater which would be ACCESSIBLE TO ALL. The Moscow Art Theater today may not exactly be accessible to ALL (it has the same problem of meeting ever-expanding demands that all the popular Soviet theaters face) but it comes pretty close to that. This is demonstrated by the sheer arithmetic of these staggering statistics which were given to me by the theater's amiable and efficient administrator, Konstantin Ushakov. The Moscow Art's "plan" called for it to perform to an audience of 771,000 in 1973 (there is no aspect of Soviet life that does not have its targets to fulfill). But the theater overfulfilled its plan, Ushakov proudly informed me as he called his book-keeper who came in with a set of books which showed that 871,400 people attended its performances that year. The Moscow Art is not just a theater—it is a massive institution that dwarfs the many quite sizable theaters in the capital, including the Vakhtangov. We certainly have nothing even faintly

resembling its facilities and resources, not to speak of its wealth of acting talent, and I doubt whether it has its equal anywhere in the world. First of all—it is not one but THREE theaters. There is the original building just off Moscow's main artery—Gorky Street—a dignified temple of art built in the best style of late 19th-century Russian architecture. It seats 1,130. Then there is the branch on Moskvín Street, that is of a similar style and vintage. It seats 1,200. Finally, there is the huge six-storey, modernistic palatial new home on Tverskoi Boulevard, with a lush lobby and attractive buffets on every floor. The main lobby with its 12 columns of natural polished wood, indented soft lights, its oak-paneled lunchroom lit up by multi-coloured masks, lovely miniature garden and cushiony carpeted floors, is a luxurious invitation to the land of magic. The 1,400 seats are not only extremely comfortable but they are so arranged that one can see well from any seat. The acoustics and engineering also make it possible to hear the actors from any position. Thus, the Moscow Art Theater can accommodate 4,000 daily. It does just that every day for 10 months of the year (as is the case with other popular theaters, one rarely comes across an empty seat).

The price of admission to this theater palace where one can watch performances by the world's greatest collection of artists (as in all Soviet theaters) was listed as follows in the lobby: for evenings, orchestra row 1-11, 2 roubles; 12-17, one rouble 90 kopecks; first balcony first row—2 roubles, 2nd and 3rd—one rouble 80 kopecks; rows 6, 7, and 8—one rouble 40 kopecks; second balcony from one rouble to 70 kopecks. For matinées, the prices are a little cheaper.

I must mention that many Art Theater's patrons, as well as the actors themselves, seem to prefer the old theaters. I can well understand their sentiments. Notwithstanding all its beauty and conveniences, the "palace" lacks the intimacy that the less imposing buildings possess. The ac-

tors and actresses do not feel the same close contact with their audience. The directors and artists have wisely taken all this into consideration. Ushakov told me that Chekhov's and others plays, which particularly demand intimacy, will not be performed in the new building. In addition to the large halls seating 4,000, the three theaters have 95 rooms for their artists—36 in the original theater, 28 in the branch on Moskvín Street and 41 in the new building. But the Art Theater is not only massive in size, space and facilities—it has a staff of 1,100 people. This includes 183 actors and actresses, five directors, and an orchestra of 31. It has its own department of scenic designers—one has but to see a performance to appreciate the significant role played by these artists. In addition, the Moscow Art Theater has its own famous school (in 1974, enrollment was 230 students taught by a staff of 85 teachers and assistants). The school has not only trained generations of Thespians for the Moscow Art stage—it has created the cadre for many of the theaters of the 15 Republics, as I pointed out earlier. And what has to be particularly stressed is that this massive quantity has always been accompanied by the Art Theater's quality which has won world-wide renown.

This huge army of top-notch actors, actresses, directors, scenic designers and musicians is intensively engaged in bringing an extensive and varied repertoire of 34 plays in a single year to close to a million people. I would hazard the guess that the Moscow Art Theater comes pretty close to reaching an audience as large as that played to by many theaters of Broadway combined, and is not too far off in respect to the total number of plays. The 1973-74 repertoire included: Gorky's "Lower Depths" and "The Last Ones", Chekhov's "Three Sisters", Gogol's "Dead Souls" and "Inspector General", Dostoyevsky's "The Village of Stepanchikovo" (a Russian Tartuffe), Schiller's "Mary Stuart", Maeterlinck's "The Blue Bird", Rolland's "Colas Breugnot", Wilde's "An Ideal Husband", Ostrov-



sky's "Even the Wise Can Err", Bulgakov's "Days of the Turbins", Kilty's "Dear Liar", Cronin's "Jupiter Laughs", Pogodin's "Kremlin Chimes", Volodin's "Dulcinea of Toboso", Bokarev's "Steelworkers", Roshchin's "Valentin and Valentina" and "Old New Year".

Ushakov informed me that the theater plans to stage A. K. Tolstoy's classic, "Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich" in the near future, as well as Chekhov's "Ivanov". It is now in process of rehearsing Tennessee Williams' "Sweet Bird of Youth".

I have detailed the Art Theater's incomparable resources which are more extensive and more actively utilized today than ever before (as well as its repertoire) so that one should bear all this in mind when one gives ear to all the talk about the great theater's "decline" and "crisis". Our directors and artists (not to speak of our audiences) would consider themselves fortunate, indeed, if this were the kind of crisis our theaters faced. The Moscow Art Theater has its serious problems and I found that Yefremov, as well as the actors and actresses I met, were quite ready to discuss them honestly and objectively. I came across few, indeed, who were smug and complacent and prepared to rest on the theater's great traditions. On the contrary, what disturbed them was that they did not feel they were adequately LIVING UP to these traditions. This, by the way, is the frank opinion of many Muscovites. But I met few, indeed, (with the exception of correspondents of our commercial press who are always prepared to report and, if necessary, to "manufacture" crises in the Soviet Union) who considered the Moscow Art Theater in a state of crisis. This is hardly the thinking of the near-million audience or the equal number clamoring for tickets.

No theater (even as great a theater as the Moscow Art) can boast of one continuous succession of triumphs. Stanislavsky himself sounded the Art Theater's watchword: "Let the theater never grow old, let it be constantly rejuvenated, may it remain true to its credo and seek the

everlasting in art." And that "everlasting" was spelled out by Nemirovich-Danchenko when he declared that art must be based on profound truth. This has been the credo the theater lived by (not always with equal success) for most of its 75 years. Its birth and rebirths are associated with great playwrights like Chekhov and Gorky who expressed their times with profound truth. And in the mid-1920s that truth in tune with the times was voiced in Vsevolod Ivanov's stirring play "The Armored Train No 1469". Many regard the staging of Bulgakov's "Days of the Turbins" as adding a new quality to and further advancing the Moscow Art's great traditions. A controversy raged around Bulgakov's play, with some opposing it as glorifying the White Guards. The fact that it was staged in 1926 speaks much for the objectivity (let alone artistic qualities) not only of the Art Theater, but the Soviet audience. The White Guards are not only depicted as full-blooded human beings, but with remarkable understanding and even sympathy for their plight as their world crumbles. And this only a few years after the savage Civil War and costly foreign intervention had been brought to an end. By comparison, even now, more than half a century after the victory of the October Revolution, one would be hard put to find an objective play on the Soviet Union or Communists in our theaters.

The Moscow Art's progress was understandably disrupted by the ravages of the nazi invasion. But there were also subjective factors that contributed to temporary periods of decline. Stanislavsky's behest, especially in respect to constant rejuvenation, was not always lived up to. The Moscow Art Theater, which has sired so many theaters and is the bearer of such great traditions, understandably treasures its heritage. But, as is often the case, a theater can also be held down by the weight of its great traditions unless it constantly ADDS to them, ENRICHES AND EXTENDS them into the field of contemporary problems of Soviet life. This, Yefremov and many others

believe, was not adequately done by the theater in the recent period. Yefremov feels that some of the young blood that went into the establishment of new theaters, the *Sovremennik*, for example, could have done much to rejuvenate the Art Theater. This may well have been the case. But there is a question whether the proper place for children is always at mother's apron strings. Nearing 20 (at this writing), the *Sovremennik* is a lusty offspring that has done its mother proud and now stands solidly on its own feet.

My own feeling based on seeing a goodly number of the Moscow Art's productions (as well as impressions of five years of Soviet theater going) is that though the Art Theater has its own serious problems for subjective reasons, many of the basic problems it confronted (and still does) can be traced to difficulties and problems faced by Soviet theaters in general. A theater (and that goes for the greatest of them) LIVES by and through its plays. The playwright provides theater's bread and meat. And for a number of years, Soviet theaters as a whole, lived on a rather meager contemporary diet. (In the 1950s, I was told, the theaters were hardly as filled as they are now.) The classics form an enduring and necessary part of a theater's repertoire (and even here interpretation with a CONTEMPORARY EYE is not easy to achieve). But contemporary playwrights who catch and express the essence of their times are needed to bring to life Stanislavsky's behest. A theater has to seek out and encourage such new voices, and this is not always done equally by all Soviet theaters. Those which did this most consistently and effectively found themselves more in tune with the times. And this was immediately sensed and greeted by the eagerly awaiting Soviet audiences.

From what I observed this is being done to an increasing extent by a growing number of Soviet theaters, including the Moscow Art under Yefremov's imaginative leadership.

I met Yefremov again on October 15, 1974 (about a year after our first discussion). By this time I had seen about a dozen of the Moscow Art's productions. In addition, I had met a number of the theater's veterans, among them Vladlen and Margo Davydov (we became fast friends), B. N. Rastsvetayev, who plays one of the leading roles in "Steelworkers", that charming grand lady of the Russian and Soviet stage, Anastassia Zuyeva, and V. Kashpour. The informal discussions and just chats with them had considerably enlightened me. Moreover, I had since summarized my impressions of Soviet theater and recorded them in my book. Thus, my second meeting with Yefremov was more of an informal mutual exchange of thinking than a formal interview.

Yefremov understood this and responded in kind. He looked more tired than last time we met and was nursing one of Moscow's clinging colds. The autumn had been unusually warm, just the kind of weather that seems to hit Muscovites harder with throat and chest colds. Muscovites seem to thrive much more on the crisp cold winter. "So you're fed up with us?", Yefremov asked in jest. The tiredness seemed to retreat in the face of the open smile that lit up his Slavic countenance. "No, on the contrary, I'll miss Moscow," I replied. "That's good!" he exclaimed. "Then you'll visit us again." The tired look returned as he puckered up his forehead in thought. "Of course, we confront obstacles. There are conservative people and just plain fools everywhere (he was referring to all countries, *M.D.*). And they impede the theater's growth and development." He paused and his face seemed to relax a bit as a smile hovered over his lips.

"But this is not an insurmountable obstacle. Our society DEMANDS plays which deal with today's complex conditions and problems linked with the course of development in our country and in the rest of the world. It's all part of a definite progressive process. And the problems arising out of this process are of profound concern to Art



and Theater as an important element of Art. Thus, the DEMANDS not only exist, they press upon art and the theater's doors. And the still existing influences of conservative thinking interfere with the theater's role in responding fully to these demands." Yefremov rose, took a few strides and continued: "Nevertheless, we can definitely say that dramatists expressing new, original and probing thinking are making themselves increasingly felt in our theater and Soviet theaters generally. They include such playwrights as Roshchin, Dvoretzky and Volodarsky. Now our theater has many plays to consider for inclusion into our repertoire. And many are quite good. We have two new plays by Roshchin and a good work by Andrei Kuteritsky, a Leningrad playwright. We plan to present the best and the most difficult of Vampilov's plays, "The Duck Hunt". We are going to stage Tennessee Williams' "Sweet Bird of Youth". He paused and said: "Yes, we have gained and are gaining new strength and a new outlook." He stopped pacing and sat down. The tiredness disappeared again but this time it was replaced not by a smile, but by steely determination.

"A theater has a far greater role to play than just to produce plays. It has to act as a center for training dramatists; it has to be a tower of strength for supporting, more for UNDERSTANDING (he put heavy emphasis on the last word) playwrights. It has to stage their plays with understanding." As I listened to Yefremov, I thought of Nemirovich-Danchenko's letter to Stanislavsky urging the staging of "Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich" as Moscow Art Theater's first production. What particularly impressed me was Nemirovich-Danchenko's pledge to impart to the actors all the profound feelings, the deep UNDERSTANDING he had of A. K. Tolstoy's work. Yes, Yefremov seemed to realize that the Moscow Art's greatness lies in its close link with the great voices who throughout Russian and Soviet history profoundly expressed their times. Yefremov continued: "We have by far not solved many

serious problems. Among them is the training of a new generation of actors and actresses who can perform in the great tradition of our theater. It is not just a question of being good actors, but they have to meet and develop these high standards. Of our close to 200 artists, only one-fifth are under 30. Many of our great artists are celebrating their jubilees. And missing is a sufficient number of the middle generation. So, you see, we have a big job ahead of us. But we are on the way."

I felt that Yefremov was consciously being restrained in his confidence. He was clearly awaiting more evidence of success. And this was understandable. The Art Theater's standards have no equal anywhere in the world. Yefremov had evidently finished. Now it was my turn. I told Yefremov that my experience with Soviet life and theater had impressed upon me the new and unique conditions under which Soviet playwrights had to deal with the problem of conflict. I outlined to him my thoughts on the subject as expressed in a later chapter (see Chapter VII). I noted: "From a historical point of view, your socialist society has resolved in a basic sense, though much still has to be done, the age-old conflict between man and society. It, of course, has other conflicts to deal with, but not this one. Thus, in mankind's historical progress your society is on a far higher level than ours. It's quite a different matter to deal with existing conflicts and contradictions in such a situation. In many ways it places more difficult tasks upon your playwrights (and writers generally). They have to deal with the conflicts in a new way. Of course, because of the difficulties faced in doing this, there has been and still are—though on a much lesser scale than in the past—some who hindered this process. But, as you correctly stressed, socialist society demands plays which grapple with the complex problems involved in constructing communist society and molding communist man and woman. And, from what I have seen, you are beginning to do this with increasing honesty and ef-

fectiveness. Your "Steelworkers" and "Old New Year" are moving in that direction. This is what has impressed me most. I agree with you: you, the Moscow Art and Soviet theater generally, though you have a lot to go yet to hit your full stride, are ON THE WAY."

### **Chekhov in the Moscow Art Theater, 1974**

The Moscow Art Theater is still THE theater of Chekhov. Nowhere have I seen the great Russian dramatist and writer more alive than on the stage which proudly flaunts his "Sea-Gull" as its symbol. In our country Chekhov is often played in a tragic, wistfully sad key, as if he were longing for something beautiful but unattainable on this earth. Chekhov, of course, deeply felt the tragedy of life under the Tsars and cried out against it with all the anger of his tender heart. And, of course, there is a universal and contemporary aspect to the tragedy of wasted, talented and loving human beings. But what is outstanding in Chekhov is not his sadness but his confidence in the bright future. It is in many respects a prophetic confidence though Chekhov was no Marxist. The Moscow Art Theater leaves you with the conviction that few dramatists today are as contemporary as Chekhov.

Chekhov is not relegated to the honorary position of a sacred classic to whom one pays homage. He is alive and doing well in Moscow! This was particularly impressed upon me when I saw "The Three Sisters". I had seen the Moscow Art's performance of the play in New York in 1965 when it toured our country. I must honestly confess, at that time I was somewhat disappointed. Perhaps the direction or even the acting was at fault. But I doubt that

was the main reason. After seeing the play in Moscow in 1974, I realized the fault largely lay with me. For one thing, my ignorance of Russian in 1965 concealed from me the many subtleties that are particularly so important for an understanding of Chekhov. But it was more than that. Much as I thought I understood Chekhov, my conception of him (and the play) had been strongly influenced by the way he was portrayed on our stage. The chief reason why I reacted much more strongly to the Moscow Art's "The Three Sisters" was not because its performance in 1974 was so much superior to that of 1965 (actually, I have no real basis for comparison), but because five years of living in the Soviet Union made the play and Chekhov so much more understandable and meaningful to me. The five years hit home to me how profoundly Chekhov understood the Russian people, how deeply he loved them and how confident he was in their future.

Soviet women are Chekhov's gifted three sisters yearning to give of themselves, fulfilled. Olga's words which conclude the play are at once a heart-rending cry of those whose talents are wasted and a paean of confidence in the future: "Time will pass and we shall be gone forever, they will forget us, they will forget our faces, voices, and how many of us there were, but OUR SUFFERING WILL TURN INTO JOY FOR THOSE WHO WILL LIVE AFTER US, HAPPINESS AND PEACE WILL COME ON EARTH AND THEY WILL REMEMBER WITH SOME GENTLE WORD THOSE WHO LIVE NOW AND WILL BLESS THEM..." Looking at the faces of the Soviet sisters of the Three Sisters I realized how much they "remembered" and "blessed" them.

Now I found I also understood Chekhov's Vershinin better. I had regarded Vershinin as a beautiful, idealistic soul who loved to pour his heart out in Russian fashion. But Vershinin is much more than an "idealistic" soul. Through this character Chekhov expresses his view of the role that had to be played by the pre-revolutionary



generation to pave the way for Russia's regeneration. Vershinin declares: "There is no happiness, there should not be and there won't be for us. We should only work and work and happiness that's the lot of our remote descendants." Vershinin's idealistic rejection of "happiness" for the generations that would prepare the ground for the Revolution and those who would chart its incredibly difficult pioneering path, of course, does not express the view of these pioneers who found their happiness in being the first builders of the new world, in their selfless labor, in their triumphs over incredible hardships, in their warm comradeship. Their concept of their "happiness" is summed up in the words of Pavel Korchagin, Ostrovsky's immortal hero of "How the Steel Was Tempered": "Don't PITY US, ENVY US!"

But Chekhov was profoundly correct and again prophetic in his basic point: TO CREATE THE BRIGHT FUTURE CALLED FOR GREAT DEDICATION, SELF-SACRIFICE AND HARD, HARD WORK AND STRUGGLE. No generations before fulfilled that role placed on them by history with a higher spirit of dedication and self-sacrifice than those who paved the way for, made, and defended the October Revolution. To fulfill this role there had to be a rejection (and a very sharp one) of a PERSONAL happiness that separated itself from and spurned any responsibility to struggle for happiness for the many. Chekhov saw that there could be no such "personal" happiness in suffering dark tsarist Russia for sensitive, intelligent and good people. Those who found "personal" happiness in the midst of such suffering were either philistines like Natalya or pitiful fools.

The theater, as all who love it know, is much more than the stage. The audience is as much part of its magic as the actors. This is particularly well known to the latter whose performance is greatly affected by the mood and reaction of the audience. I found myself somewhat in the same position as the actors. My mood, too, and more, my

new understanding of the play, were very much affected by those who were seeing it together with me. I had the feeling that I was watching a play within a play. On the stage I listened to Chekhov's prophecies, while in the theater were assembled the prophecies fulfilled. And it was this SOVIET REALITY that now formed an inseparable part of Chekhov's "The Three Sisters".

It suddenly struck me how much the anti-Sovietism that has been part of our daily diet for more than half a century affected our understanding of Chekhov. Not that one has to embrace socialism to appreciate Chekhov. But how much of Chekhov can one really understand without grasping that the future he envisioned (and which he never characterized politically) has come to life in the land he loved so deeply? Without such an understanding (and interpretation) Chekhov remains an idealistic dreamer, of whom there were and are many, and not a man of profound prophetic vision of not only the future of his long-suffering native land but of the ordeal of fire that lay ahead for those who were going to usher it in. How much can his Three Sisters be understood without seeing them in their daughters and granddaughters who "remember" and "bless" them? Without such an understanding Chekhov's is, indeed, a "sad" and "tragic" voice. To the Moscow audience that watched the play with me Chekhov and his Three Sisters were not tragic (though they felt deeply their tragedy). They were triumphant! This hardly means that the tragedy of unfulfilled and wasted lives has been completely eliminated in Soviet society. And I'm sure there were those in that audience who identified themselves with the Three Sisters yearning for fulfillment. Socialism opens the doors wide to the pursuit of happiness, it demolishes and removes age-old obstacles obstructing that pursuit but, in the final analysis, personal fulfillment still remains a personal quest. But what a world of difference when society is your ally and not an enemy in that search!

## Leningrad's Bolshoi Dramatic Theater

Few are louder in praise of this Leningrad theater than Moscow's theater people, many of whom do not hesitate to proclaim it the best in the Soviet Union. After an intensive week in Leningrad with this dramatic group I was ready to agree with this estimate. This feeling in me grew with almost every performance, but it wasn't until I mulled over it that I understood why. Leningrad's Gorky Theater has remarkably talented, versatile actors and actresses. But in that respect their colleagues in the Moscow Art Theater and the Vakhtangov are in no way inferior. Actually, when it comes to sheer quantity of fine artists, I believe, the Moscow Art still holds first place.

Of course, considerable credit for the Leningrad theater's pre-eminent status has to go to its renowned director, Georgi Tovstonogov. But it would be wrong, in my opinion, to attribute it just to Tovstonogov. It is not my intention to make any comparisons here but I was also quite impressed with the directing skills of Anatoly Efros of the Malaya Bronnaya Theater, Yuri Lyubimov of the Taganka, Kaarel Ird of Vanemuine and Juozas Miltinis

of Panevežys. What, in my opinion, this Leningrad theater has in considerably larger measure than the other theaters is a MARVELLOUS COMBINATION OF DIRECTING AND ACTING ABILITIES. It is NOT a DIRECTOR's theater, though Tovstonogov's firm hand and bold, imaginative outlook is clearly felt in all its presentations. In that sense both the theater and Tovstonogov differ greatly from the Taganka and Lyubimov. The Taganka is a DIRECTOR's THEATER. That, I believe, is its weakness as well as its great strength. The towering genius of Lyubimov tends to overshadow not only the actors but the playwrights. In the Taganka Theater, the axiom "the play is the thing" does not quite hold. It is more often Lyubimov's interpretation and adaptation that IS the THING. And very often it is a very good thing. But a DIRECTOR's theater—even when the director is as great as Lyubimov—is a theater that already has built-in limitations, because it places in a secondary role the theater's PRIMARY INSTRUMENT—the ACTOR. More than any Soviet theater, the Leningrad Gorky Theater demonstrates how great a theater can be when its TWO main elements—actor and director—are harmoniously combined. Tovstonogov himself was forthright in his recognition of the decisiveness of achieving this harmonious combination when he discussed with me his concept of the relationship between director and actor. Forceful director that he is, he was unequivocal in emphasizing the PRIMARY role of the actor. "Everything in the theater, is, above all, resolved through the actor," he stressed repeatedly to me when I interviewed him in his office after watching the rehearsal of a first play by the highly versatile and talented Vassily Shukshin.

We had been discussing the search for new art forms that often ends up by making the FORM, the be-all and end-all of the theater. Tovstonogov, as his plays demonstrate, is no slouch when it comes to expanding the limitless elasticity of the stage, but, whatever the technique, it



only serves to heighten the actor's ability to interpret his or her role. You end up not being awed by the technique but more deeply moved by the human beings portraying human beings. "Everything must be expressed through the artist—new forms and sharp problems," Tovstonogov said, expanding on the point he made earlier. "Without such a relationship between form and artist, the form can kill the artist," he warned. I had heard similar stress on the role of the actor from Andrei Goncharov, director of the Mayakovsky Theater in Moscow. But, it seemed to me that the application of this credo was much more effectively demonstrated in the Leningrad Gorky Theater than in the Mayakovsky. Tovstonogov differs from Lyubimov in another sense—his emphasis is on the depth of psychological portrayal. Lyubimov's is a publicist theater where sharp problems are expressed in an agitational form. Tovstonogov had high praise for the Taganka Theater and, like most Soviet theater people I saw, he recognized the great role it played in the contemporary Soviet stage. "But I seek to deal with sharp problems psychologically rather than publicistically," he said. Tovstonogov, I was pleased to see, drew no hard line between the contemporary and the classic. This is demonstrated not only in his repertoire which admirably combines both but in that the contemporary permeates all his classical presentations. I note this because such was hardly always the case. I came across not a few Soviet theater people whose approach to the contemporary was mechanical, to say the least. "What period does the play cover?" was the first question that seemed to interest them. And if the play, God forbid, should be set three or four decades ago, that was enough for them to conclude it lacked the "contemporary". For Tovstonogov, the contemporary meant that the problems raised and dealt with corresponded to the problems confronted by people today, regardless whether they were set in the times of Shakespeare, Molière, Gorky, or in today's Soviet reality as dealt

with by Rozov, Roshchin, Volodin or Vampilov. This meaningful concept of the contemporary, I found, guided the approach taken by the best and most popular Soviet theaters.

Tovstonogov and his wonderful group (I specifically include the excellent technical staff) are equally at home with all forms and all periods—this is reflected in their extensive repertoire. And that they are well tuned in on the present Soviet scene was effectively demonstrated in their production of Roshchin's extremely popular and honest play "Valentin and Valentina", which deals with some of the problems of love faced by today's Soviet youth. I was familiar with the play, having seen it some months earlier in the Moscow Art Theater. (It is also being performed at the Sovremennik.) I found the Leningrad production much better than the Moscow Art's. It was fresher and breathed more of the spirit of youth. Moreover, it was more imaginatively staged and acted with greater understanding. The Leningrad staging lent itself to greater mobility (faster change of pace) and kept the threads of continuity more tightly in hand. You moved with Valentin and Valentina from their furtive rendezvous in the street to their homes and to Valentin's hangout with his student friends in a steadily mounting stream of action. The style is abrupt and at times choppy, not at all in the smooth style of the "well-made" play. But its very abruptness fits in with youth's restless and often frustrating search for love and understanding—for happiness and the fulfillment of dreams.

Action and conflict are augmented and deepened by personal narrations. Each character is at once a party to the conflicts and a narrator. At each climactic point, the character particularly involved (as if anticipating the audience's questions) steps out and explains his or her actions and philosophy of life. Neither the playwright, director nor actors are in any sense didactic—it's all done in a way that you'd expect to hear it over a cup of coffee

or, better still, over a bottle of beer or glass of *vodka*. The play itself deals with an ageless theme—youth's right to love when, whom and how it seeks to love. And the conflict also is hardly new—the struggle against parental interference and obstruction which is rationalized by concern for their children and their experience. But what gives this play its interesting and refreshing quality is that these eternal and universal themes are probingly and honestly dealt with in terms of Soviet reality, Soviet people. As I followed the play, the thought occurred to me: how would an American audience react to it? (Incidentally, a number of U.S. theater people who saw it not only liked it, but expressed a desire to see it produced on our stage.)

I believe Americans, especially our parents, would find the PROBLEMS faced by Soviet parents and youth quite pale in comparison to ours. They would, on the one hand, find themselves longing for SUCH problems and, on the other, somewhat skeptical that they could really exist on such a NORMAL level in these turbulent times. The one problem raised by the play, that Americans would find more serious and frustrating than our own, has to do with the difficulties Soviet young couples still confront in getting an apartment. I think our audiences would find refreshing the idealism of Soviet youth which manifests itself even when it is cloaked in know-it-all cockiness with a dash of cynicism or sophistication. The cynicism (it would be more regarded as naiveté in our country) is expressed in the discussions by Valentin's friends, of the lovers' difficulties and whether there is such a thing as love. With all their cynicism they gather the money and make the necessary arrangements to help Valentin and Valentina pay for an apartment, as a wedding gift.

But the play reveals psychological and social (as well as physical) problems confronted by Soviet youth in love. It presents and castigates the social prejudices that still

exist and affect Soviet youth in their love relations. Among other reasons why Valentina's mother is opposed to her daughter's marriage to Valentin is that his mother is an ordinary worker. (Valentina's mother occupies an administrative position and her father was a high army officer). Valentina's family is clearly better-off financially. Any comparison between our country and the Soviet Union in respect to the role played by differences in income in personal relations would be ludicrous. Differences in income, of course, still exist under socialism but they are almost meaningless when compared to the income and social gaps that divide our "free enterprise" society. Nevertheless, they exist—there still is the difference between mental and physical labor, and the cultural and ideological effects of these differences make themselves felt, as I noted in the preface. The aim of constructing the material basis of communism and molding Communist man and woman is, among other things, to eliminate these still existing differences. Mental and physical workers still tend to associate more in personal relations with their own strata, and a snobbish attitude continue to exist among some toward physical labor and those engaged in such work. These constitute a small minority (almost nonexistent in comparison with our country), and they are out of the mainstream of Soviet life whose dominant theme is an ode to labor. But there are nonetheless negative influences from the "legacy" of capitalist society that have to be combatted. This clearly is the object of Roshchin's play which holds up to ridicule and punctures these snobbish prejudices.

Above all, the play is an earnest and moving appeal for more confidence in the ability of Soviet youth to find their way through the thorny path of love. Roshchin's play once again demonstrates what has yet to be done by socialist society to aid youth in their search for fulfillment. And, particularly, in respect to resolving the complex problems of relations between the sexes. Socialism and



even communism will hardly eliminate the pain and, at times, tragedy that come with love—the cynicism and mental cruelty that often accompany these problems. In our society, the battle of the sexes is not only encouraged to divert both sexes from the real struggle against a decaying society; it is now assuming the most distorted and abnormal forms (and hailed as “freedom” of the sexes). To those who are engrossed with the problems centering around such a struggle between and within the sexes, “Valentin and Valentina” will, of course, be hardly of interest. But it would be, indeed, of great value as well as refreshing for Americans to get a glimpse of what problems the sexes face in a socialist society. In Soviet society there are conflicts between men and women, sometimes quite bitter and dirty. But there is no general battle of the sexes, and the problems between them are not regarded in that light. However, the conflicts and problems are nevertheless serious as the rather high divorce rate indicates.

Roshchin also lashes out against those who use their own bitter love experiences as a club to batter down the young soaring on the wings of beautiful, idealistic, even if innocent, love. “What a crime it is to destroy such beauty,” the playwright’s heart cries out. And the audience’s heart—parents and their youth—cries out with his. I felt, however, that Roshchin’s exhorting conclusion was a bit too pat and moralizing. After it is clear that the lovers will overcome opposition to their marriage (Valentina’s mother after initial resistance encourages and aids the couple), the final scene shifts to the street. They stop a passer-by (Valentin’s friend poses as a newspaper man) and asks him if he believes that love truly exists. The passer-by (the author in poor disguise) gives a beautiful and eloquent reply. But it was hardly necessary. All that needed to be said had already been said and very well. Yet the superfluous ending does not detract from the overall power of the play which, in the first place, lies in its

honesty and sincerity. It is this which the Leningrad Gorky Theater and Tovstonogov so well understood and brought out so effectively.

### **The Contemporary in the Classic**

It is one thing to state the correct relationship between the classic and the contemporary, as, I believe, Tovstonogov did so pungently. It’s quite another to demonstrate this in life—on the stage Tovstonogov’s production of Gorky’s classic, “The Philistines” does just that. I left the Leningrad theater more deeply engrossed in thought about life today and more shaken up than I had been on many occasions after I had spent two or so hours watching actors portray life that was as “contemporary” as today’s newspaper. Yet Gorky’s play was set at the turn of this century. What was it that made me feel so close to the life portrayed on that Leningrad stage? First of all, it was Gorky and not Tovstonogov and no one understood this better than Tovstonogov himself. This, I felt, was hardly the relationship that existed between Shakespeare and Lyubimov when the latter staged his interpretation of “Hamlet”. Gorky’s theme, put in terms of American reality, is the deadly and deadening effect of “COMMODITY CULTURE” on human beings. I can think of no people to whom this theme is closer and hence more contemporary than our own. The very essence of the rebellion of our youth during the 1960s (now continuing in new, though less explosive forms) was directed against the stultifying and dehumanizing values that placed property and profit above people. The explosions will become more violent and more frequent in our “free enterprise” society because it is in such a ripe stage of decay that everything decent in human beings is impelled into increasing rebellion against such a monstrous way of life,

made all the more monstrous because it is in such glaring contradiction to the good life that can and should be ours.

The home of the Bessemenov household (headed by the patriarchal merchant Vassily Vassilyev) is solid and stable in its exterior. Everything, from the huge grandfather's clock which Vassily winds with clock-like precision and keeps in perfect time exudes order and durability. The impression created is that this can last forever, that is, before its inhabitants begin to reveal the inner decay eating at them. Sounds familiar? The solidity and stability of the White House BEFORE Watergate? The solidity and stability of our dollar, of our inflation-ridden economy, the solidity and stability of our social system before the 1930s and, more recently, in the 1960s and 1970s? The solidity and stability of a society that produces 9 million vehicles a year and fear-ridden cities? Such is the "solidity and stability" of the morally-oppressive Bessemenov home where it is almost as difficult for human beings to breathe as in our own "solid and stable" society today. What poisons the atmosphere in the Bessemenov home? It is the same rouble (or dollar) VALUES the family (starting with Vassily) live by that pollutes OUR HOME today. A standard of values that for Vassily are things symbolized by his massive furniture, representing power and stability, and one lives to possess, calculate and guard them. It is a standard of values that places THINGS ABOVE PEOPLE. Vassily not only lives by these VALUES, he demands that all in his household live by and for them and every challenge to this way of life arouses desperate resistance. It is a soulless, empty existence that is death to the human spirit. And Vassily, though he defends to the bitter end this way of life, even as his household crumbles about him, is as much a prisoner of this philistine existence as his wife, son and daughter. He is a tragic as well as a despotic figure. Order for Vassily means not only the furniture; every member of the household must know and keep his place. Again, sounds

familiar? In the tsarist Russia of the turn of the century, "place" was determined by the rules of a rising capitalism that still retained feudalistic mores. This, of course, lends the play a historical ring. And for the characters to be real (and that is the only way they can have CONTEMPORARY MEANING) they have to live within and reflect the essence of their times. BUT IT IS THAT ESSENCE WHICH HAS MEANING FOR TODAY BECAUSE IT STILL EXISTS. And in our capitalist society it is AN EVER-MORE PERVADING AND OPPRESSIVE ESSENCE.

The rebellion against Bessemenov philistine way of life is led by Nil, a worker who is Bessemenov's employee and lives with the family. Brought up from childhood in the Bessemenov home which typifies the feudal patriarchy that clings to developing Russian capitalist society, Nil rebels. The patriarchal Vassily regards his action as base ingratitude, notwithstanding the fact that he squeezed years of profit out of Nil's labor. "What are you living for? You are playing out an endless drama that could be entitled 'Neither Here nor There'", Nil tells Vassily at the very beginning of the play. This about sums up life in the Bessemenov household. Nil not only rejects the Bessemenov values; he has clear human values of his own and he knows where he is going. More, he has the strength to take Polya, the daughter of a distant relative of Vassily's, with him. Polya also lives with and works for the Bessemenovs.

The most tragic figure is Vassily's daughter, Tatyana, a PATHETICALLY unhappy woman who suffers from the stifling atmosphere of the household but who hasn't the strength to break away from it. Tatyana is drawn to Nil's strength and confidence in his future, and when she discovers that Nil and Polya love each other, she collapses and tries to commit suicide. Pyotr, the son, is a chip off the old block, notwithstanding his bold revolutionary phraseology and singing of the Marseillaise (which



resounds ludicrously in the Bessemenov atmosphere). He leaves the crumbling home to live with Yelena, a woman much older than he but whose joy of life is in such contrast to the dismal, dreary Bessemenov existence that he finds her irresistible. But, as the wise, gently cynical Teterov, a Bessemenov boarder, consoles Vassily: "Don't worry, he'll come back, he's as much you as yourself."

What did Tovstonogov and his excellent group do to make this play of tsarist times meaningful for the Soviet audience of today? Well, first of all, Tovstonogov decided to include it in the theater's repertoire. And it was not an accidental choice or merely a decision to stage a Gorky classic. As Tovstonogov himself explains, he was in search of a play that would focus on the problem of contemporary philistinism, a problem which has in one form or another, and to varying degrees, been the theme of many plays the world over. Incidentally, while Tovstonogov has little in common with the theater of absurd, he notes that "paradoxically as it may appear, it was this theater that prompted me toward new reflections about 'The Philistines' ". And "new" thinking was, indeed, necessary to make Gorky's plays fully meaningful for the Soviet Union of the 1960s and 1970s. As Tovstonogov noted, Gorky wrote almost all his plays about people whose life ended with the October Revolution in 1917. The merchants, clergy and industrialists have disappeared from the memory of the Soviet people. And one can add: there is, indeed, little resemblance between the workers Gorky portrayed and the highly advanced (culturally as well as technically) Soviet worker.

From what Tovstonogov has to say (and though I personally do not know of this—it is understandable), for a time Soviet theater found it hard (and, consequently, so did the audiences) to find and uncover the LINK between the problems Gorky's characters faced and SUFFERED from and those confronted in contemporary Soviet life. Thus, all too often Gorky's plays came across as historical

portrayal of a life that has long ceased to exist. They were informative, interesting and, as works of art, deeply moving, but not fully felt as powerful and urgently needed weapons for today's struggle. It was as if the enemies of mankind Gorky spent a lifetime fighting against no longer existed.

True, as Tovstonogov points out, in the person of the classes which have disappeared from Soviet society they, indeed, no longer exist. However, as he correctly notes, although "there are no Bessemenovs, but philistinism still exists". Tovstonogov points out that a contemporary presentation of Gorky's play is charged with an irreconcilable struggle against philistinism as a danger which contains survivals of the past and is also a real danger for today. And he notes that, although philistinism's sphere of operation and influence is quite different, it nevertheless still makes itself felt in Soviet life: "In one, it is a striving for money, in another, it is a thirst for glory... all this is philistinism". There is, of course, no comparison to the influence exerted by philistinism in the two social systems. For one thing, the "striving for money", the driving force of our free enterprise society, indeed, has limited scope under socialism (a scope which is being further narrowed with the advance toward communist society). "Thirst for glory" is a more complex quality to eradicate and is closely related to careerism. Here, too, there is no comparison between the two societies, as the cancerous corruption in high places in our country (symbolized by Watergate) demonstrates. But philistine qualities (including careerism) do exist in Soviet life, do harm the quality of that life, do present dangers, do require sharp and constant struggle. One of the principal aims and tasks of the advance toward communist society is the **MOLDING OF NEW COMMUNIST MAN AND WOMAN**. And the eradication of philistine characteristics is one of the chief targets in that process. The theater as a social, collective forum is one of the most important

instruments in that struggle, and from the review of the plays, classic as well as contemporary, that grace the Soviet stage, it is clear that Soviet theater is sharply engaged in that struggle. Not sharp enough and not yet hitting on all cylinders, in my opinion, but from what I have observed and noted here, the struggle is gaining momentum. It is on a far higher and more effective level than on our stage.

Here, permit me to add my own personal thoughts on the subject, based on my five-year observations of Soviet life. The philistine qualities that can still be observed in Soviet life, BASICALLY have their source in the economic INEQUALITIES that still exist in the socialist phase of communist society. Picayune as they are in terms of the inequalities in our society, they, nevertheless, do exercise a negative influence. In some, the urge to achieve a higher economic status gives rise to self-seeking, to disregard for their fellow Soviet citizens, opportunism, preoccupation with the acquisition of material comforts and pleasures, toadyism. These are ugly characteristics that disfigure those Soviet people who are marked by them. They contribute to cynicism, especially among those (particularly the young) who do not see that the eradication of these qualities is a process of objective development as well as ideological struggle. Cynics in our bourgeois society, where such philistine characteristics are the norm, have long given up the struggle against them under the pretext that they are inherent in an unchanging and unchangeable "human nature". Incidentally, these very same cynics have hardly GIVEN UP the struggle when it comes to NOT-ING the existence of these QUALITIES IN THE SOVIET UNION. In this, they are joined by ultra-leftist "purists" who want NOT ONLY INSTANT COMMUNISM BUT INSTANT COMMUNIST MAN AND WOMAN.

The struggle to change human beings for the better (the age-old dream of philosophers and poets in capitalist society) is reduced to beautiful dreams at best and pious

platitudes at worst, without a struggle to CHANGE THE SOCIAL SYSTEM THEY LIVE IN. In the Soviet Union, the Bessemenovs have disappeared. In our country they not only have not disappeared, but their class and its standards of values, dominates and stifles the life of our people. BUT THE NEED FOR STRUGGLING TO CHANGE PEOPLE FOR THE BETTER STILL EXISTS. IT IS AN ETERNAL STRUGGLE (NOW FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HISTORY LED BY A SOCIETY ITSELF IN A HUGE AND GROWING PART OF THE WORLD) BECAUSE MAKING HUMAN BEINGS MORE HUMAN IS A NEVER-ENDING PROCESS. This is what makes Gorky's plays universal and eternally CONTEMPORARY as it does Shakespeare. This is what Tovstonogov and his excellent group understood and revealed in their production of "The Philistines". Incidentally, all this was accomplished with a minimum of NEW FORMS. Tovstonogov, who does not hesitate to employ new forms and knows how to do so effectively, correctly concluded that in this case it was not necessary to bring out the contemporary qualities of the play.

### "Public Opinion"

The Gorky Theater also demonstrated its deadly skill with the rapier of satire. The evening before I had sat glued to my seat as Yevgeny Lebedev, one of the outstanding members of the group, brought to life that tragic symbol of old Russian philistines, Bessemenov. Now I was rolling in the aisles (with the audience) as Lebedev portrayed with devastating accuracy the epitome of bureaucracy, unprincipledness, toadyism and careerism. It is just such characters as Christinow that feed on and tend to disfigure socialist society. But it was not only Lebedev who participated in this satirical carnage. The slaughter, of course, started with the play "Public Opin-



ion", a brilliant *tour de force* by the Rumanian playwright A. Barranga. "Public Opinion" is such a hit it is being simultaneously staged to packed houses by a number of the prominent Soviet theaters, among them the Malaya Bronnaya. Tovstonogov's direction demonstrated he knew how to draw blood with the rapier as well as the meat-axe. And the Leningrad actors presented a gallery of knaves with such vividness that their every mannerism called forth hilarious identification from the audience. The audience, it was clear, was quite familiar with these characters and, even more, these characteristics. The setting of "Public Opinion" is the editorial office of a Rumanian newspaper—but the Christinows, unfortunately, are still an all-too numerous breed known to citizens of every socialist country. (The audience was hardly made up of newspaper people.)

There is the editor-in-chief (played by Lebedev), whose "merit" largely consists in his great skill not only to sense where the wind is blowing, but where it is likely to shift. Basing himself on this barometer, Christinow (the "chief") treats people accordingly. He brushes aside subordinates with a ready-made set of clichés. Judging from the continuous hilarious response, they were quite familiar to the audience. And with equal ease Christinow, groveling, makes a 180-degree turn when he senses a possible change in the status of a subordinate. Surrounded by his circle of sycophants, Christinow holds court. Life could be so snug and comfortable! If only all would play the game. But this cozy set-up is threatened by Kiltaru, a conscientious journalist who loves and respects his work. Kiltaru looks with a jaundiced eye on Christinow and his cronies. It is all the more disturbing because it is a mocking eye. Understandably, the mutual admiration society feels compelled to get rid of Kiltaru. And so, when the word goes down that retrenchment in staff is in order, who, if not the disturbing eye, is to be sacrificed. The "dismissal scene" is an unproarious, pious charade. Even more de-

vastating than the biting dialogue is the way Christinow (Lebedev) uses his eyes. Every pious humbug has his particular trade mark. In some, it is the beseeching appeal to the heavens accompanied by rolling eyes and heaving sighs. In others, it is the cracking of knuckles. Or the steady drumming on the desk. With Christinow it is that tired, martyr-like pressing against, and rubbing of his eyes. It is saintly martyrdom in agony! In his cronies the act calls forth commiseration; in Kiltaru it evokes ill-concealed derision. Kiltaru is dismissed. But as he gets ready to leave the chief's office, the phone rings—not for Christinow but Kiltaru. The "chief's" antennae start twitching. And when the caller turns out to be the chief's superior, who is clearly friendly to Kiltaru, the antennae register frantically. Righteous wrath gives way to saccharine concern for Kiltaru's liver. And so, dismissed Kiltaru walks out with a promotion—he is now the chief's deputy. Not only does the new deputy refuse to play the game, he insists on getting rid of some of the deadwood and demands that Christinow's cronies produce something besides sycophantic praise of their great leader. Life becomes quite unbearable. Suddenly, Kiltaru's protector retires. The mutual admiration society springs into action. But, quite unexpectedly, the wind shifts again. A new "superior" appears (literally rising from underneath the stage). And he makes straight for Kiltaru whom he embraces and praises for the progress registered under his leadership. The "chief" frantically rubs and presses his pained eyes. The wheels in his bureaucratic brain whirl desperately, and again the 180-degree turn is executed with precision. Exasperated, he signals his cronies to make the required shift. One by one, the same people who crucified him "politically" now re-evaluate Kiltaru "politically". The ready-made phrases flow easily in either direction. And the conclusion? The audience is given its choice—a "positive" or "negative" ending. Who was the mysterious "superior", who suddenly made his appearance?

The force of public opinion in a highly conscious society.

Tovstonogov's direction is deft and as deadly as Baranga's dialogue. The entire atmosphere is light, easy-going and all the more devastating because it ridicules but never lectures or harangues. All takes place in a play within a play setting. The actors, particularly Kiltaru, stop to banter and chat with the audience and to argue with the writer about the lines he gives them. A conveyer brings the "chief", desk, telephone, rubbing eyes and all, right up to the front of the stage. As I watched this hard-hitting play and listened to the audience's approving laughter, I could not help thinking of the image of an oppressive humorless socialist society that has been foisted on the American people by our anti-Soviet propaganda machine. Yet even a sketchy review of the type of plays presented to the world's largest theater audience explodes that myth. Nevertheless, the myth is still stubbornly being propagated by our "Sovietologists". It lives on because one can count on the fingers of one hand the number of Soviet plays performed on our stage or translated into English. Few American visitors to the Soviet Union are acquainted with Soviet theater—in addition to the black-out and distortion, there is the language barrier to hurdle. Our Moscow correspondents either ignore contemporary Soviet plays or, like Anthony Astrakhan and Robert Kaiser of the *Washington Post*, they go to the theater or turn into "reviewers" when they believe they can detect the scent of dissent.

### Miller's "The Price" in Leningrad

I was particularly excited when I learned that Arthur Miller's "The Price" was scheduled for performance the day I arrived in Leningrad. I had seen the play at its New York premiere in February 1968, and was quite favorably

impressed with it. Miller, though groping, seemed to be probing in the right direction in the tumultuous '60s—far more on the right track than in the early '70s when he was derailed by anti-Soviet roadblocks. Tovstonogov and his group, I felt, had made a wise choice, for "The Price" tallies the human cost of being top-dog or under-dog in our dog-eat-dog society. Miller makes his reckoning with superb story-telling skill in the course of which he introduces one of his funniest and most memorable characters, Gregory Solomon, an allegorical yet very earthy 90-year-old appraiser. To see Solomon alone is worth "The Price". And I was very anxious to see how Solomon was portrayed on the Leningrad stage (I'll deal with that later on).

But I was even more interested in how the mood, the sense of the time, the struggle for human values in an inhumane society (everything takes place in quite a specific American setting) would be presented and interpreted. In his play Miller dissects the values of our decaying society by examining the estranged relations of two brothers—Walter, a cynical successful surgeon, and Victor, an unhappy police sergeant awaiting and frightened by the prospects of retirement. The Great Depression of the '30s hovers over the conflict. And, indeed, it did hover over the Leningrad stage. I am personally very familiar with those cataclysmic years that struck the "prosperous" U.S. of the late '20s like a 9-point earthquake and leveled countless comfortable homes of families like the Frank family (the two brothers). As organizer of the Unemployed Council of New York in those days, I met many such suddenly impoverished families. R. A. Sirota, the Leningrad Director, (like Ulu Grosbard in the New York production) captured the essence of this upheaval in the lives of millions of Americans with the raising of the curtain. S. Mandel, the Leningrad stage designer (Merited Artist of the Russian Federation) did an extremely effective job in setting the



mood for the entire play. The brothers, many years after the "wounds" of the cataclysm were "healed", have their reckoning in their old home. It was like turning back the clock which had stopped on the shattered and aged remains of their family affluence. Mandel's sets bring the sense and smell of those shattering days. On the Leningrad stage the attic of the once-plush brownstone home is cluttered with once highly priced furniture now outmoded and awaiting the bone-paring price of time and the appraiser. And Mandel's sets have to be considered (as Sirota obviously did) as an important CHARACTER in Miller's play—it is TIME REMEMBERED.

Time is also recalled and linked with the present in the person of Solomon, the ancient appraiser summoned by Victor Frank to estimate the sales value of his family "heritage". To Solomon, the cluttered room is a return to life. "You must have looked up my name in a very old telephone book," he tells Victor as he fingers a pencil and pad. And Solomon mixes his calculations with the wit, wisdom and mellowness rooted in Sholom Aleichem's ghetto Russia. His is the humor that is the reverse of the cynical, malicious poking fun at other people's expense that gained popularity in recent years. It breathes love of life and pride in endurance. When the aged Solomon is on the stage (and Miller wisely sees to it that he is for a good deal of the play) his youthfulness is in bright contrast to the deadened spirit of men little more than half his age. Solomon is a sort of witness and judge, and appraiser of HIGHER VALUES than the old useless furniture—the different values by which the two brothers lived. These values revolve around which pronoun comes first in life: We or Me? Walter lived by "Me" and prospered by it. Victor paid a dear price for living by "We". It was observing the clash of these two values in a society which had resolved this question more than half a century ago, that gave special meaning to this performance of Miller's play in Leningrad. Whereas in New

York, its setting was in a society of "Me"s, in Leningrad the audience was a product of a society that lives by "We". Not that there were no Walters in the Leningrad audience. The Walters have hardly disappeared from Soviet life and, I believe, in one form or another they will be around for some time. They represent the lingering "heritage" of a society that has been removed from the scene of history but whose influences and habits still outlive it.

In his dissection of the conflict between the two brothers Miller exposes more than the break-up of a single family. In embryo the struggle mirrors the collapse of family relationships—for few families can withstand our free enterprise society's price of success. Walter paid for his affluence by becoming a member of that monstrous fraternity in our country, the money-making medical machine. I watched intently as the Leningrad audience listened to Walter expound his recipe for "success". "You need a certain fanaticism" and for that you have to eliminate "everything extraneous, including people," he tells his unsuccessful brother. And to illustrate his point, Walter confides: "There's big money in the aged, you know, helpless, desperate children trying to dump their parents—there's nothing like it." The faces in the audience registered horror bordering on incredibility. I believe, the Soviet audience would have found characters from Mars more understandable. You have to know something about the reverence and respect with which the Grandmothers and Grandfathers are held in the Soviet Union to appreciate the revulsion that this philosophy evoked. And Tovstonogov and his group, thank God, made no effort to gild the lily, so to say, by milking this scene propagandistically. It was all the more effective because it was presented as a "natural" way of life. Thus, the Leningrad audience could see that Walter was sleek, successful and soulless like the sick society that produced him. And they could also observe in Frank's fate that

those who live by "We", are doomed to a life of leftovers from an "affluent" society's groaning table. They are tormented by self-doubt that in the name of practicality eats away at one's belief in the validity of decency and poisons the relations of those whose human instincts compel them to gag at the dog-eat-dog morals of our way of life. In face of his brother's efforts to purchase self-justification, Victor desperately clings to the values that set his "price". But Victor's was an instinctive, not a conscious, choice that so many good people make in our inhuman society. And, like Victor, they plead: "Give us something REAL." And here is where Miller not only fails Victor, but us. He is not yet ready to give us something REAL. Now it is more clear why. The same anti-Soviet blinders that conceal SOCIALIST REALITY from most Americans contribute considerably to Miller's blind spot. When Victor cried out on the Leningrad stage: "Give us something real" there was something pathetically incongruous about this appeal, echoed by so many Americans yearning for a more human life, with that reality literally staring us in the face. But I frankly wonder if the Leningrad audience had a similar reaction. After all, the overwhelming majority have lived with something REAL all their lives. However, whether all caught each of the undertones of "The Price", or not, it was quite clear that the Leningraders got the message. They got it in good part not only from Miller, but from Tovstonogov and Sirota and their wonderful group of sensitive and understanding actors. Tovstonogov, incidentally, has never been to our country. This speaks all the more for his profound understanding and artistry. I am convinced that the performance of Miller's play by the Leningrad troupe in the U.S. would ring a bell. In some ways, the play was better performed in Leningrad than in New York. This was particularly the case in respect to the portrayal of Gregory Solomon. Leningrad's successful interpretation of "The Price" was especially made possible by the profound

portrayal of the 90-year-old appraiser by Vladislav Strzhelchik. I do not hesitate to say that Strzhelchik's Solomon was far more deeply probed than Harold Gray's in New York. Not that Gray's interpretation was at fault. Gray had no apologies to make for his masterful characterization. It was just that Strzhelchik is an extraordinarily sensitive and understanding artist. This is well known to Soviet theater and cinema goers. Strzhelchik (as I came to realize when I interviewed him in his dressing room right after the performance) deeply understood and LOVED this memorable character. He understood the wise Sholom Aleichem humor that coexisted in Solomon with the sorrow accumulated in a near-century of existence. You could see that Strzhelchik knew his character (as much as, and perhaps even more than his creator). This was revealed in every gesture and intonation. In Strzhelchik's stooped, burdened but dignified and enduring walk you knew that, though bent by time, Solomon was not about to break. The fire of life, fed by his deep feeling for people, still glowed brightly. It sparkled in his wise wit. Solomon had come not to appraise the furniture in the old home, but the way of life chosen by its former inhabitants. I asked Strzhelchik how he saw Solomon. And his answer speaks much for his extraordinary portrayal. Solomon was Jewish in character and universal in his wisdom and understanding of life, he said. And that was his Solomon: Jewish and yet everyman. The form was specific and the content universal. That is why it had flesh-and-blood reality. That is why Strzhelchik's Solomon evoked a profound response in Leningrad's multi-national audience. There were many Soviet Jews present, and they, of course, were drawn to, and their attention held by Strzhelchik from the minute he made his appearance on the stage. But the same could in large measure be said for everyone else in the theater. As I entered his dressing room, Strzhelchik was removing the last bit of make-up. Before me sat a sturdy solidly-



built very Slavic-looking man who appeared to be far younger than his years (Strzhelchik, who is about 53, looks no more than 40). It was difficult to believe that only a few minutes ago he had portrayed an aged, very Jewish character, without a single false or overacted note. YOU LAUGHED WITH, NOT AT, SOLOMON and at times wept with him. Strzhelchik, you could see, understood how close to each other are humor and tragedy and his Solomon had Chaplinesque qualities about him in that sense as well as the spirit of Sholom Aleichem.

Yet Strzhelchik had nothing in his background that prepared him for such a sensitive interpretation of Solomon. He is of Russian-Polish parentage. I asked him how he came to portray the Jewishness of the character with such profound artistic truth. Strzhelchik told me he was a long admirer of the Soviet Yiddish stage. He knew Mikhoels, the famous Soviet Jewish actor and director, and had seen many Yiddish plays performed by the Moscow Jewish Dramatic Ensemble headed for many years by Shvartser (now directed by Berman. I saw this group in a number of plays). Strzhelchik had also attended performances of the Warsaw Jewish People's Theater (I also saw this excellent troupe in Warsaw). He thought very highly of both the Warsaw and Moscow Yiddish ensembles. Strzhelchik informed me with pride that his good friend, the noted U.S. composer Dimitry Tiomkin, who is of Russian-Jewish extraction, had seen his interpretation of Solomon and was greatly impressed with the artistic truth of the character. Incidentally, Strzhelchik, like most of the outstanding Soviet actors and directors I met, was quite natural and untheatrical off stage. He had none of the superior airs one often finds in our far richer but, I would guess, far less happy "stars". And, as is the case with almost all Soviet actors and actresses I met, his was, indeed, a full-time and, I would say, over-time life of stage and screen. Soviet actors could use a bit of the "unemployment" our theater people suffer from.

But my guess is that they would hardly want any of it. Strzhelchik, who served with the Soviet armed forces during the Great Patriotic War, has been with the Leningrad Bolshoi Dramatic Theater for 36 years—all but 17 years of his life.

From Dina Schwartz, the charming and knowledgeable head of the theater's literary department, I got a brief but comprehensive picture of the theater's background. Dina Schwartz is the daughter of an old Russian revolutionary who had to flee to Paris to escape tsarist prison. He returned to his native land with the victory of the Russian Revolution. History, indeed, hovers over the Gorky Theater. It envelops you from the moment you approach the immense, impressive building dyed a greenish tint that is so typical of Leningrad's world-renowned classical structures. You cross one of the city's numerous bridges (the theater sits on the edge of the Fontanka River) and the first sight that meets you is the perennial crowd of ticket-seekers—the hallmark of a theater's popularity. The difference between the Moscow and Leningrad crowds is that while the former has many soldiers and Army officers of all ranks, the latter includes members of the Soviet fleet. Leningrad, after all, is a great port, adjoining the famous Kronstadt naval base. Our theaters, on the other hand, can boast of very few servicemen inside or outside their doors. Built in the lavish style of the Kirov (former Maryinsky) Theater in Leningrad and the famed Bolshoi in Moscow, Leningrad's Gorky Theater was once owned by Countess Apraxina, (who, incidentally, owned the entire area). In 1913, it housed the theater headed by the monarchist reactionary Suvorov. It was the first dramatic theater to be established after the victory of the October Revolution. It came into being in 1918 and its founders were Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first Soviet Minister of Culture, Maria Andreyeva, the famous Russian actress and the wife of Maxim Gorky, and Gorky himself. Lenin played an important role in the theater's

establishment. Andreyeva was its first director, and she invited Alexander Blok, the beloved Russian poet and author of "The Twelve", that captured the spirit of October, to head the literary department.

Blok was called "the conscience of the theater".

The theater was launched (and marks its birth) with a brilliant performance of Schiller's "Don Carlos" on February 15, 1919. Schiller's play was a tremendous success. Here is what Dina Schwartz told me: "Just imagine Leningrad in that fateful year when it and the young Soviet Republic were fighting for their very lives. Yudenitch and his Whiteguard army were at the gates of our city. The theater was packed with soldiers and sailors and workers' militia who left the performance to defend their Revolution. To them "Don Carlos" was not a play of times long gone by. It was a call to struggle against tyranny and for freedom and liberty NOW". As Dina Schwartz recalled the Leningrad theater's revolutionary birth, I thought of Moscow's Vakhtangov Theater which staged Gozzi's delightful fairy-tale play "Turandot" in similar grim days. From its very inception Soviet theater drew on the classics for inspiration. Schiller and Gozzi were enlisted in the struggle for a world of brotherhood. Gorky strongly believed that the newly-born Leningrad theater had to fill the need of the time—a romantic theater that could express the sweep of the Revolution. He didn't feel that the Moscow Art Theater at that time quite met that need. In the early and middle '20s, the Leningrad Theater combined the best in world and Russian classics as well as the revolutionary works of young Soviet playwrights. Shakespeare's "Othello", "King Lear" and "Macbeth", Schiller's "The Robbers", Maeterlinck's "The Bluebird", plays by Molière and Goldoni were produced alongside such works by Soviet dramatists as "The Breaking Asunder" by Boris Lavrenyov, "Aristocrats" and "After the Ball" by Nikolai Pogodin, "Street of Happiness" by Natan Zarkhi and "Man With Portfolio" by Alexei Faiko. The

theater drew upon and harmonized the influences of the great founders and innovators of the Russian and Soviet stage—Stanislavsky, Nemirovich-Danchenko, Meyerhold, as well as Brecht and Piscator, the great creators of the German revolutionary theater. Though Stanislavsky and Meyerhold differed greatly in many respects in their approach to the role of the theater, Tovstonogov did not regard them as being in conflict with each other. On the contrary, Tovstonogov believes that great people of the theater can find agreement in practice.

Tovstonogov, one can readily observe, is an innovator with very clear-cut ideas of his own on the theater. But his is innovation that is based on the great traditions of the past and that builds on its heritage. That heritage, as he noted, was handed down by Nikolai Monakhov, whose "Don Carlos" launched the theater on its successful career, Vladimir Maximov, the first hero of Soviet cinema, Andrei Lavrentyev, Konstantin Tverskoi, a follower of Meyerhold, who greatly influenced the theater, Alexei Diky, and Boris Babochkin, who created the immortal role of Chapayev. Babochkin served as the theater's director for a number of years. Gorky's plays exerted a profound influence on the theater in the early 1930s. It has been strongly felt ever since, as "Philistines" demonstrates (though "Yegor Bulychov", the first Gorky's play staged in 1933, was not very successful). Gorky's credo "theater of tragedy, romantic drama and high comedy" has guided the theater. It was under Babochkin's direction (1938-1941) that "Summer Folk" and "Enemies" were produced with great success. Earlier, Diky presented "Philistines" in 1936 with equal success.

Tovstonogov has been the theater's director since 1956. He received his training in Moscow under Lobanov and Popov from whom he got his penchant for probing psychological portrayal. Before coming to Leningrad he was director of the Tbilisi Dramatic Theater. Like others, the Gorky Theater had sort of lost the link between its



great past and the new needs of contemporary times. Tovstonogov's great contribution was that he not only re-established that link but has with every year demonstrated the growing vitality of the theater. Form, genre, classical or contemporary works—all serve one aim for Tovstonogov and the Gorky Theater. "We have tried to solve new tasks in every play so that in step with life we are going forward with our audience, illuminating with our footlights the most varied aspects of the life of the human soul, of the life of our contemporaries." This Tovstonogov's credo, is reflected in the theater's wide-ranging repertoire. Its 1974 season of 20 plays includes, besides those I have reviewed, Shakespeare's "King Henry IV", Bulgakov's "Molière", Gogol's "Inspector-General", Eugene O'Neil's "A Moon for the Misbegotten" (a great hit which has run for seven years), "Hanuma" by the Georgian playwright Tsagarelli, "The Alumni Gathering" and "From Evening to Afternoon" by Victor Rozov, "Two Anecdotes" by Vampilov, dramatization of Dostoyevsky's stories, and plays by the very popular Soviet playwright Alexander Volodin. The Gorky Theater in size and scope is similar to Moscow's Vakhtangov Theater. It has a permanent staff of 300, including 75 actors and actresses, a beautiful theater that resembles the Bolshoi, seating 1,500, and a small one for experimental performances. It received its honorary title as academic theater in 1962 with its presentation of Sholokhov's *Virgin Soil Upturned*.

### Tovstonogov at Work

I received an invaluable insight into the inner workings of Soviet theater when I attended in Moscow rehearsals of "Balalaikin and Company", the Soviet dramatization of a biting satirical 19th-century novel by the Russian Swift, Saltykov-Shchedrin. (I also sat in briefly

at a rehearsal in Leningrad.) My chief objective was to observe Georgi Tovstonogov in action. I also wanted to get a closer look at Soviet actors and actresses. I'll have more to say on that a bit later.

Tovstonogov was directing the play at the Sovremennik, which was preparing to include it in its repertoire in the fall of 1973. The Saltykov-Shchedrin novel *Modern Idyll*, adapted as a play by Sergei Mikhalkov, the well-known author of many popular children's plays and cinema scenarios, presented a real challenge Tovstonogov quite obviously relished. A devastating blast against bourgeois liberal "revolutionaries", who "waited out" tsarist reaction in comfort and corruption, I found it quite contemporary in respect to the similar role quite frequently played by redder-than-the-rose "revolutionaries" and liberals in our own country when the going got tough. One has but to recall the craven silence on, and even consent to, the witch-hunt against Communists during the McCarthy hysteria of the 1950s. It became clear in the early stage of the rehearsal that bringing to life the numerous sharply etched caricatures with which Saltykov-Shchedrin filled the pages of his novel, synchronizing their movements, actions and, yes, gestures, in a word, ORGANIZING the parade of characters walking out of 19th-century Russia so that they retained flesh-and-blood freshness for a near-21st-century audience of builders of communism, was going to be no easy task.

For one thing, the play was quite mobile and the sheer movement of furniture and sets (all done in full view of the audience) presented quite a problem of organization and split-second-timing. The "movers", incidentally, were members of the cast. In fact, *how* they moved the furniture and sets, was no small element in creating the mood and the tempo of the play.

A good director is that rare combination of artist and organizer. From what I observed, Tovstonogov had these qualities in abundance. It was quite obvious that, like a

master conductor of a symphony, he had every "note", every movement, gesture, word and pause, firmly fixed in his mind. A belated entrance or exit, an ill-timed pause, a misplaced chair, lighting that was to the slightest degree off-shade, chords that didn't quite synchronize with an exit or pause—and Tovstonogov was on his feet. He was not only the sensitive artist rebelling against the faintest false note—he was the business-like organizer, creating theatrical order out of what could otherwise be chaos. At the same time, though, Tovstonogov was clearly determined to recreate the picture he had in mind on the stage, he was hardly inflexible. I watched as he listened attentively to the actors explaining their difficulties or conceptions of their roles or such technical details as where and how to stand. And quite often, Tovstonogov changed his image of the play's movements in line with their suggestions.

Tovstonogov's style was quite different from what I observed of Lyubimov and Efros. (I'll have more to say later about Efros, whom I regard as one of the most sensitive of the Soviet directors.) In one sense, he and Efros appeared to be similar in approach. Both placed their main focus on the ACTOR. Lyubimov, in line with his total, visual theater, was more of a master technician in the fullest and best meaning of that word. Tovstonogov was brisk in his manner and quite volatile and quick in reactions and responses. He barked out his orders, though rarely in a commanding tone. The comradely atmosphere predominated in all director-actor relations I observed. Tovstonogov was in perpetual motion even when he was sitting.

Efros, on the other hand, appeared to be more contemplative. As I watched him during rehearsal, he sat quietly, engrossed in what was happening on the stage like a member of the audience. His face was a picture of audience reaction. He appeared to be mulling over each scene like a spectator. He seemed to "store up" reactions, and

after a while would jump on the stage to act out a role. He, of course, would also shout out corrections from his seat. Tovstonogov appeared to come to his decisions more rapidly and to act on them more quickly. The styles and the temperaments were different, as they should be, but both achieved the main objective—the creation of the slice of life they envisioned.

Tovstonogov told me he has had a long-standing close relationship with Moscow's Sovremennik. He regards it and his own theater as having similar outlooks. Both date their birth (or rebirth, in the case of the Leningrad Gorky Theater) with the fresh cultural breeze that followed in the wake of the 20th Congress (in 1956).

But watching the rehearsals made me realize more fully the vast reservoir of talented and highly professional actors and actresses Soviet directors have to draw on. The Soviet stage, notwithstanding its many fine directors is, in the final analysis, an actor's stage. A wise director knows and makes the most of this. The life of a Soviet director with all his or her difficulties is made considerably easier than in our country, because he or she is backed by excellent, well-staffed four-year schools that provide a constantly growing supply of highly-trained actors and actresses, technicians, a vast network of near-professional amateur theaters, children's theaters which stimulate an early love for the stage, the repertory system which is in itself the best training school, and an immense audience which is at once very appreciative and very critical. We, too, have many, many very talented actors and actresses who through no fault of their own are terribly under-utilized. Moreover, they are denied these extremely stimulating forces Soviet actors enjoy. As to the actors, take the cast I observed in rehearsal of the Saltykov-Shchedrin play. Andrei Myagkov, who plays what we would call a bit part (although a very rich one and extremely demanding), was Alyosha in the Soviet film "The Karamazov Brothers" and Lenin as a young man,



in another film. And he was unrecognizable, because, unlike most of our "stars", Soviet actors are not typed. My attendance at rehearsals made it possible for me to become better acquainted with a number of actors and actresses. Watching a play come to life makes you more than just a member of an audience. You become a temporary member of the collective.

Theater in the Soviet Union is life itself for actors and actresses just as it is in our own country. Only in the Soviet Union it is MUCH MORE SO. This is because, as I pointed out earlier, Soviet actors, in the main, work and hence live in their theater on a much more permanent basis. Just consider their "working hours". They work ten months out of the year in six or more roles, in addition to doing jobs in TV and cinema. Besides constant rehearsals they attend regular meetings of their theater collectives, and many—of Party and Komsomol groups. This is quite a big order, perhaps a bit too big. But from my discussions with Nina Doroshina, Merited Artist of the Russian Federation, one of the founders of the Sovremennik, I don't think she and most Soviet actors and actresses regard themselves as being overworked. I met Nina during the Tovstonogov rehearsals, and later my wife, Gail, and I talked with her during the intermission of Rozov's "The Alumni Gathering". Nina looked exhausted. And for good reason. She had performed earlier that day in the opening of the Saltykov-Shchedrin play and she also acted in 10 other roles besides during that season. In addition, she did bit and leading parts in cinema (she has made about 20 films). Nina not only did not complain about her load—she was prepared to increase it. Her "vacation" was to be a two-month tour of the Soviet Union and abroad, to be followed by dramatic performances in the Crimea. All that remained was a ten-day rest, which Nina felt would be quite enough. "I'd get terribly bored if I were away from the theater longer," she told me. And watching her on the stage, I could see

she meant it. Tired as she looked in the dressing room, she seemed to be transformed once she got on the stage. The look of exhaustion disappeared and in its place was such vibrance and vitality!

Granted, some of this was the old professionalism but it was much more than that. This really was her life, you could see, and she wanted to live it to the hilt. I felt, however, that as creative and fulfilling a life as it was, it was a little too much so. I could not help feeling that such all-absorbing creativity could also create problems and have its negative sides. Though Soviet actors are closely connected with the Soviet people, with whom they are in almost daily contact as their audience, I wonder if the all-absorbing life in the theater leaves much time or room for more intimate, personal contact with those whose life is not of the stage.

## Cultural Renaissance in the National Republics. Vanemuine Theater

If little is known about contemporary Soviet theater in the U.S. this is even more true in respect to the extremely vital theater in the national republics. The famous Vanemuine Theater in Tartu, Estonia's ancient university town, illustrates the cultural renaissance I saw everywhere. I spent a delightful day in 1971 with the theater and its dynamic and extremely imaginative director Kaarel Ird. I met Ird again in 1973 at the 15th Congress of the International Theater Institute, and he was bubbling over with new ideas. No wonder many directors and critics from all over the world at the Congress, including Americans, sought him out.

Tartu has only a population of 80,000 but 250,000 attend Vanemuine's 550 performances every year. Theater lovers come from every part of the Estonian Republic as well as from all other Soviet republics not only to enjoy the theater's varied and original productions but to learn from its experiences. The Vanemuine, which in 1970 celebrated its 100th anniversary, is a unique theater. It is a drama, ballet and opera theater, all rolled into one. It

is also singularly versatile. In the course of a week, its actors, directors and producers, will participate in productions in all three genres. Ird chuckled when I expressed surprise at the demands placed on his staff and performers. Versatility and the Vanemuine just naturally go together.

The Vanemuine had practiced total theater long before that concept became popular in the U.S. Perhaps not so much in the sense of single productions as in the sense of meeting the audience's theatrical demands to the fullest extent possible. Tartu's audience, Ird pointed out to me, is a small-town audience. In addition to the townspeople, it is regarded as their theater by collective farmers from southern Estonia. To illustrate his point, Ird showed me the statistical study of Vanemuine's audience. (The people's character of the theater is, indeed, demonstrated by the fact that such a survey was made.) Here is what the survey revealed: nearly 33 per cent are workers, 31.2 per cent—students, 17.7 per cent—intelligentsia, 11.3 per cent—schoolchildren and 6.8 per cent—pensioners. More than 35 per cent are newcomers from collective farms of neighboring districts. "Tartu is not Moscow with its multitude of theaters for all tastes. The Vanemuine has to meet the demands of the entire people. It has to be a truly PEOPLE'S THEATER," Ird stressed.

I can hear those in our country who think in terms of an esoteric, elitist theater, scoffing at this concept. But the Vanemuine is living proof that a theater for ALL the people need not be bound by conservatism. From its imaginative director to its modernistic stages and auditoriums, the Vanemuine breathes the spirit of innovation and originality. I saw its interpretation of "Maria", a popular modern Soviet play on a vital contemporary theme, written by Afanassy Salynsky. Earlier I had seen the Mayakovsky Theater's production of the play. The Vanemuine made me feel I was watching an entirely different play.



The Vanemuine was the first to stage Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and *The Merchant of Venice*, Prokofiev's opera "The Gambler", and a number of operas by Mozart, as well as Gluck's "Orpheus and Eurydice". Its repertoire includes Brecht's "Three-Penny Opera" and "Galileo" (it was one of the first to stage the latter in the Soviet Union), plays by Sholom Aleichem, Arthur Miller's "The Crucible", G.B. Shaw's "St. Joan", classical Russian and contemporary Soviet plays and, of course, works by Estonian writers and composers, past and present.

Ird guided me through the pictorial history of his theater exhibited in Vanemuine's vast art gallery-like lobby. The Vanemuine was born in a national resurgence against the domination of the Baltic German barons. We stopped before a picture of the Vanemuine Society as it presented its first play "The Cousin From Saaremaa", by the Estonian authoress L. Keidula. The name, Vanemuine, was taken from the great Finnish epic "Kalevala". (Estonian and Finnish are kindred tongues.)

From Tartu the theater lights went on in Tallinn, Narva and other Estonian towns. And from its inception the Vanemuine sought to combine all the theater art forms. The Vanemuine, too, suffered when, after a brief period as a socialist state, Estonia was compelled to take its 20-year bourgeois detour. For 20 years Estonia "enjoyed" the "blessings" of the "free world". Its native bourgeois rulers, obsessed with anti-Sovietism and anti-communism, sold their country's independence first to a number of imperialist states, and, when Estonia took the fascist path in the 1930s, they made it a dependency of Hitler's Third Reich. The Vanemuine and Estonian culture paid dearly for this betrayal. There was a brief but heart-warming revival in 1940 when Estonia rejoined the Soviet Union. The pictures in the lobby reflected the Vanemuine's enthusiastic rebirth. Then we came to a scene of ashes and rubble. It was the Vanemuine in the autumn of 1944, after the retreating nazis had set fire to it.

We needed no pictures to introduce us to the Vanemuine of today. It was all around us. The Vanemuine is housed in a Palace of Culture in the full sense of that title. In respect to its facilities, as well as beauty, it is surpassed only by Lincoln Center in New York! Certainly, I know of no city in the U.S. of its size that has anything to compare with the Vanemuine's Palace. It has three beautiful auditoriums, one seating 840, another—700 and the third—500. It also has a large open-air theater. Its revolving stage can compare with the best of Broadway. It has a well-stocked library, a nice lunch room and innumerable work, study and make-up rooms. The Vanemuine has a staff of 400, which includes a drama group of 35, ballet—33, opera—20, chorus—50, orchestra—50. When it is borne in mind that all participate in all art forms (often combined in one production) one gets some idea of the formidable cultural forces at the Vanemuine's disposal.

The Vanemuine's studios are not limited to training professional actors. Many of its best actors and directors work in factories, or are budding scientists and university students. Evald Hermaküla, who directed "Maria", is a geology student. The Vanemuine has three schools: drama, ballet and vocal. Ird, the Vanemuine's director since 1940 (excluding the years of nazi occupation), also heads the drama school. He is not paid for that additional function. "It's my public obligation," Ird explained. The Vanemuine, of course, has its own national tradition and unique form. But from what I observed, in its own way, every republic has a Vanemuine.

### The Path to Panevėžys

Perhaps nothing speaks more for this highly-respected Lithuanian Drama Theater than the fact that theater lovers from all the corners of this vast land have beaten

a path to Panevėžys, a town of 90,000 population in this small Baltic socialist republic. Panevėžys and the distinguished theater which proudly bears its name have, indeed, become one and have achieved renown together. I sensed more than pride—love—for the town, that has been the home for this theater since 1940 (it was founded with the restoration of Soviet power in Lithuania), when I interviewed Juozas Miltinis, its chief director, in the Moscow Art Theater's branch on Moskvina Street. Panevėžys was on its eagerly-awaited 3-week tour of the Soviet capital in September 1974. The lobby was jammed with pleading Muscovites, including many from the city's theater and cultural world, who were literally besieging the administration office for tickets. An hour or so prior to each performance I walked a block-long gauntlet of ticket seekers before making my way to the theater doors. I noted all this to Miltinis, a stocky, grey-haired man with a neat beard framing his chin, and with the most gentle whimsical smile I had ever seen. Miltinis nodded with quiet pride as one who was naturally pleased at the way his group was acclaimed in this center of Soviet culture. But his pride was tempered with philosophic calm—Miltinis generally impressed me as being of a philosophic bent of mind. There is no question that his theater would be similarly welcomed in the capitals of all the Soviet republics. But Miltinis is reluctant to go on tours. "I like to stage our plays in our own theater in Panevėžys. IT'S OUR HOME," he said quietly. And you could see he was talking about much more than a building, although our interview had hardly begun before Miltinis pointed to two pictures in a booklet—one of an old modest structure that served as the theater's home until 1967, and the other—an impressive, huge building which it presently occupies. It reminded me very much of the palatial theater in Tartu, which I described earlier. Miltinis, like our leading baseball and football stars prefers to play on home grounds. However, the attachment, I

sensed, was of a deeper quality than that which motivates our athletes. It had to do with Miltinis' own life story as well as the history of the Panevėžys theater. For understandable reasons (the "cultural" atmosphere of reactionary bourgeois Lithuania) for many years of his life Miltinis could not call his native country his home. He had to learn the art of the stage in foreign lands. And his theater and its extensive and varied repertoire, as well as the acting school which he has taught ever since the founding of the Panevėžys (and still teaches), demonstrate that he absorbed the best in French, British and German theatrical culture. For more than five years (1932-37) he studied in Paris in the school of theatrical art conducted by Charles Dullin. He also learned a great deal from Jacques Copeau and the famous directors Jean Villard and Max Reinhardt (he planned to work in Germany for a time but his plans were dashed by Hitler's advent to power), as well as such masters of the English stage as John Gielgud.

Miltinis is well acquainted with British and U.S. playwrights, from the classical to the modern. "I studied English to read Shakespeare in the original," he confided to me. But Shakespeare led him to an abiding interest and respect for the dramatists of our country. Miltinis showed me a fresh copy of the best plays of 1973-74 that he had just received from the U.S. and was reading. He is familiar with and admires many of the plays of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee. Miller's "Death of a Salesman" was one of the Panevėžys' biggest hits. Miltinis, incidentally, visited the U.S.A. as a tourist in 1968. "I had just reached New York from Los Angeles when I witnessed the murder of Senator Robert Kennedy on my hotel TV," he told me. And the reality of what he had seen still seemed unreal to this master of drama. He was quite anxious to visit the U.S. and acquire first hand familiarity with the U.S. stage.



When Miltinis returned, in 1939, to his native Lithuania after its liberation from the reactionary-fascist regime that led to the country's downfall, he brought with him the rich experience accumulated in the years of his cultural Odyssey abroad. But it was hardly an accumulation that was uncritically assimilated. Miltinis' is a deeply probing dialectical mind, as our discussions revealed. His is a Marxist outlook on the best of the cultural contributions of the West, as his interpretation of Strindberg's "The Dance of Death", Durrenmatt's "Frank V", and Ben Jonson's "Volpone" reveal. Miltinis drank deeply from the fount of the great Russian and Soviet contemporary theater. In Paris he studied the Stanislavsky system with Vladimir Sokolov, one of his teachers. Moreover, he has maintained consistent contact with the theater world of Moscow. For many years he has regularly visited the Soviet capital, twice annually, to see plays and exchange experiences with his colleagues. And, of course, the Panevėžys theater has played a vital role in drawing on and stimulating the development of Lithuanian drama (as well as cinema), as the widely acclaimed film "No One Wanted to Die" by Vytas Žalakevičius, a close co-worker of Miltinis, and acted in by outstanding artists of the theater, demonstrates. Thus, the Panevėžys theater reflects the unique theatrical experience of its organizer and leading spirit for more than three decades—a sort of synthesis of the best in Western and Soviet theatrical training. But what has to be added is that all this has been nourished by the rich cultural soil of Soviet Lithuania which, in turn, is fed by the gathering cultural stream that courses throughout the vast breadth of this first land of socialism. It would be difficult to imagine a path to Panevėžys being beaten by the world's theater lovers without a Soviet Lithuania.

The Lithuanian theater's renaissance was savagely interrupted, as were all areas that were in the eye of the nazi storm, by the Hitler invasion. It is interesting to note

that more was accomplished in Lithuania in the brief period of little more than a year of Soviet power before the war than in the more than 20 years of bourgeois rule. The situation in Lithuania was the same I came across in all the other Baltic Republics, as well as in Lvov (Western Ukraine) and Kishinev (Moldavia), formerly occupied by bourgeois reactionary Poland and Rumania, respectively. Soviet power released everywhere a cultural renaissance that opened wide the theater and concert doors. And for the elderly man with wise and youthful eyes, who now sat before me, all this was not mere history—it was the story of half his life. Then, on his 67th birthday (it was celebrated on September 3, 1974, on the opening night) his Panevėžys had come to Moscow, acclaimed as one of the Soviet Union's outstanding theaters of this theater-wise land. Now, it was French directors who were coming to Panevėžys (a group visited it in 1974) as well as from Japan, U.S. and other countries. Miltinis, who was a delegate to the UNESCO Theater Institute Congress in Moscow in 1973, was besieged by outstanding theater people of the world. Today the honored title—Panevėžys player—bears the mark of quality in acting. Many of Miltinis' pupils have achieved international, as well as country-wide fame on screen as well as stage, among them Donatas Banionis, the USSR State Prize winner, whose acting in the title role in "Goya", a film made by the Soviet Union, GDR, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia, was hailed at the 8th International Film Festival in Moscow in 1973.

Miltinis' credo explains much about the style and content of the Panevėžys' acting. Practically all of the artists are his former pupils, and Miltinis does not engage actors from other schools. This is not because of snobishness or disregard for the merits of other institutes. Miltinis struck me as anything but arrogant. It is simply that he regards his school and the Panevėžys stage as adjuncts of one another. You leave the school to practice

what you learned on its stage—it is a continuous, uninterrupted process. And this also explains why Miltinis never ceased being the teacher. The man who has helped to “teach” some of today’s outstanding actors and actresses is firmly convinced: “It is impossible to learn acting.” It is impossible, he believes, because “acting is creation, a living man is being created from the living one”. Miltinis regards the source of talent as lying in the “richness of the actor’s personality, his spiritual resourcefulness”. He sees the playwright as “polemizing” with the “contemporary, educated and demanding theater-goer” and visualizes the “actor of the future as a philosopher and acrobat”.

I asked Miltinis to elaborate on the latter point. His face broke into that gentle smile which lent so much youthfulness to his face. He seemed to be thinking out loud as he spoke: “All technique comes from culture (whether it pertains to acting or any other form of art). But there is a difference between the actor and other artists. For example, the architect uses stone and other material to create, but the actor can only create from what is within him, from himself.” Miltinis paused for a moment as if to grasp the right English words to express his thoughts. When we began the interview, he was at once hesitant and eager to express himself in English. “I badly need practice,” he noted, and I am convinced that one of the reasons for his ready acceptance of my request to see him was his eagerness to get “some of the practice”. I assured him I was most happy to oblige. “Now as to philosopher and acrobat,” and again he broke into that whimsical smile. “I use the term ‘acrobat’ in a metaphorical sense. The actor must not only be an acrobat in body but in mind. Every word has many meanings—its meanings can be immediately changed by a gesture, expression, intonation and movement. There is always the fantastic, the metaphorical in acting. Playing itself is always metaphorical. As for truth—there is no greater truth than in life. In life one acts through concrete things. But on the

stage we have no things—only the image of things. All that has value is spiritual.” And to create not only the image of truth but a deeper truth (which is the essence of great acting, as of all art), Miltinis believes, does, indeed, demand of an actor the qualities of an “acrobat”, which enable him through the elasticity and flexibility of his body and mind and entire being to create that profound truth which will grip the audience. As if to read my thoughts, Miltinis continued: “Actors are not only in dialogue with one another but with the public. Our viewers are our partners in the dialogue. But they are partners whom WE MUST PERSUADE. And how do we persuade them? We must bring to our audience the feeling that what they are seeing is MORE THAN REALITY. THAT IS THE MYSTERY OF ACTING.” And, as every theater-goer knows, where there is no persuasion there can be no such magic as mystery. “That is why,” Miltinis continued, “language on the stage is international, absolutely international. That is why in watching good acting one doesn’t think of language.” Watching the Panevėžys players (and I stress *watching* advisedly) I can vouch for the truth of Miltinis’ words. I listened to Russian translations via earphones as the actors spoke their lines in Lithuanian. For a while, I must confess, I found this somewhat disconcerting. I had learned to follow the course of the play rather smoothly in Russian (and my tongue is English), but now the actors were speaking a new and strange language. Then, quite suddenly and quickly, I was no longer conscious of the double language barrier. It was bridged by the “acrobats” performing agilely in body and mind.

Miltinis’ high regard for the actor’s calling also explains why he scoffs at the concept of a “director’s theater” so much in vogue in the West. This notwithstanding the fact that he is personally well aware of the vital role played by the director as the one who creates the overall image of what is to be enacted, one who is the indispensable organiz-



er, bringing and putting together all the powers of the stage. But, as one who knows that acting can't be taught, Miltinis sees the true role of a director in finding the way to bring out the essential and decisive element in theater—the creative personalities of the actors. "There is not, and can never be, a 'director's theater'," he stated categorically. "On the contrary, it is, and always will be, an 'actor's theater'. A good director can only become good through actors. I'm a teacher of actors—I know. It's very difficult to explain to an actor how to act. A director can't enter into the INTERIOR of the actor. He can FIND talents, but he can never MAKE them. . . . A director who concentrates on DIRECTING can only have a puppet theater—not a live theater." He stopped and was lost in thought for a moment, then, as if speaking for himself as well as all directors, noted: "Only after the actors have been acclaimed for having done their jobs well will an audience ask: who was the director?"

This self-effacing quality sincerely expressed Miltinis' attitude to the relationship between actor and director and in no way smacked of affected modesty. It is the Panevėžys as a group that is widely acclaimed. The name "Panevėžys" far overshadows the name of its founder and guiding spirit. So much so that, although the fame of this dramatic group was long well known to me, I only became aware of Miltinis when I contacted the theater in Moscow.

### Panevėžys' Strindberg in Moscow

The skillful combination of fantasy and reality and of the philosopher and the acrobat, the dialogue and polemics with the audience, all aimed at persuading the viewers that a more profound reality was before them, were brilliantly demonstrated in the Panevėžys' performance of Strind-

berg's brooding, biting play "The Dance of Death". It was like moving from Miltinis' classroom to his theater's stage to witness his concepts come to life. Now I could better appreciate the indissoluble link he saw between teaching and directing and why he put such stress on drawing his actors from his pupils. Strindberg's lengthy (three and a half hours) introspective, symbolic play, dissecting the self-devouring alienated bourgeois world as it is revealed in the cannibalistic relations between the sexes, presents quite a challenge to the most competent actors and the most imaginative of directors. Strindberg deals with much more than a "*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*" battle of the sexes. Among other things, this play discloses how much Albee and other "modern" and "avant-garde" playwrights are indebted to Strindberg.

The great Swedish playwright (1849-1912) was in passionate, if understandably bitter, rebellion against the insane, decaying bourgeois world with its immoral and inhuman relations which alienated people from one another, destroyed their moral fibre and turned them into instruments of mutual torture and their homes into well-furnished dungeons. Strindberg employs poetic (even though dark) symbolism, deep psychological and philosophic probing as his chief instruments of dissection. The characters are brutally real and, at the same time, nightmarish symbols, as are the imposing walls of their comfortable cold home which confine them like prison walls, and the telegraph ticker which is the sole means of their communication with the alienated outside world. But Miltinis perceived and sensitively revealed Strindberg's deep compassion for people. He profoundly understood that the great Swedish playwright's bitterness was directed not so much against the characters he dissected as against the immoral bourgeois morals that drained them of the tenderness and idealism of their youth and transformed them into cannibalistic creatures. Melėnaitė's Alisa was deeply moving in her closing words recalling the kind, idealistic, loving

Edgar of 20. Hers was the passionate protest of mankind against the soul-destroying forces that rob human beings of their humanity.

Miltinis also highlighted and contrasted the tender love of Judith, Edgar's daughter, and Allan, Kurt's son. This is how human beings want to love, Strindberg seems to be saying. In Miltinis' hands the scene is transformed into a lyrical appeal. I discussed this interpretation of Strindberg's play with Miltinis, and he underscored the playwright's passionate involvement with the suffering of the tormented and tormenting people he depicts. "In the hands of a progressive-minded person, pessimism is the threshold for happiness," Miltinis declared. "Those who are hopeless await death and view life pessimistically. But those who understand man's mortality and search for a way to make life better can never be pessimistic no matter how bitterly they cry out." He paused and summed up his thought: "People see the clouds in the sky and wait for the sun." In the hands of the Panevėžys players, the humanism of this bitter Swedish playwright is to be seen in what, above all, emerges through all the savagery of his characters. This, I believe, is why most of the Moscow audience was so deeply moved.

Strindberg was, indeed, in passionate polemic with the insane and inhuman way of life and with the bourgeois theater-audience of his time. His was an honest, though pessimistic cry of anguish, as was the voice of other great dramatists who could not yet see the world of the future in process of being born in the dying world about them. It was a lonely voice that could not persuade the bourgeois theater-goers who were hardly anxious to see themselves stripped of all the shams and pretensions that covered them more than their latest Paris models. The chamber of horrors of bourgeois personal relations Strindberg described in fantasy as well as in reality, has, indeed, become more reality and less fantasy in today's decaying capitalist world and, especially, in its citadel. Thus, it is not too hard to

PERSUADE an audience in that world. It is a far more difficult task that, moreover, places greater artistic demands on actors and directors alike to PERSUADE those who live in a quite different world, a socialist world, of this deeper reality.

I would not say that the Panevėžys and Miltinis fully succeeded in this respect with their entire Moscow audience. For a good number it was obvious that this was too strange a world to grasp. As one viewer put it to me: "We don't have time to engage in such cannibalistic personal relations." And in a basic sense what she said hits the nail on the head. Life in the Soviet Union has its difficulties, its personal tragedies and crises. But all this exists in the atmosphere of purposeful activity. The Soviet people are moving ahead and they know where they are going. But it would be wrong to smugly conclude that the ghosts of the bourgeois influences Strindberg arraigns, especially as they affect personal relations, particularly between men and women, have been fully driven from Soviet life. This is certainly not demonstrated by the divorce statistics. And this is hardly the attitude taken by Soviet dramatists and writers in general, who, if anything, are sharpening the struggle against these ghosts of the past. Thus, even though the world and the characters (in symbols) Strindberg portrays have long disappeared from Soviet reality, enough of their residue is still left to give contemporary meaning to his play. But there is another reason, in my opinion, why such plays merit an audience in the Soviet Union.

One of the needs of Soviet theater, cinema and literature in general, is to make more profoundly and artistically real the capitalist world. This is necessary for a number of reasons, aside from the fact that cultural progress demands such an understanding. Nothing is more educational today for the Soviet people, as well as our own, in my opinion, than the contrasting of the two worlds in all the basic aspects of life, including personal relations. But making our decaying world REAL to those living in a



world that is becoming as far removed from ours as Mars, is increasingly more difficult. And the demands placed on the powers of persuasion are increasing correspondingly. It is in this sense that I believe the Panevėžys and Miltinis met the test admirably in their Moscow performance of Strindberg's "The Dance of Death". The audience, by and large, was gripped and persuaded by the more profound reality on the stage. And Miltinis' "actor's theater" was, indeed, the chief instrument in this artistic persuasion. Banionis as Edgar demonstrated the extraordinary powers that have made him so widely acclaimed, Melėnaitė as Alisa, his wife, and Babkauskas as Kurt, the old friend brilliantly portrayed the other chief characters.

This was the first time that Strindberg was performed in Moscow. I doubt it will be the last. On the contrary, I believe that what Miltinis and his Panevėžys players demonstrated is that Strindberg is more contemporary than many who parade themselves as avant-guardists. I believe this was deeply felt by most of the Moscow audience. The Panevėžys, in my opinion, plays a particularly important role in Soviet theater. It contributes another dimension to the growing versatility of the Soviet stage. Drawing on Miltinis' rich and unique experience in the theaters of two worlds (I don't know of another Soviet director who has had the opportunity to so absorb, first-hand, the best of the theater of the West) it has developed a fresh original style. Its triumphant Moscow tour revealed that this is not only recognized but welcomed.

But, perhaps, the real significance of the Panevėžys and Miltinis lies not so much in the growing acclaim they have justly earned. The theater's audience, first and foremost, are the people of Panevėžys and of Lithuania—the workers, farmers, students, professionals. It is for them (and in their tongue) that all has been and is being created. Miltinis and Panevėžys have never lost sight of that main goal. "You should come and see us in Panevėžys—we play much better there," were Miltinis' parting words to me. They

were the wise words of a veteran of the theater who well knows how much an audience means to those on the stage. Miltinis, if anything, feels a bit closer to his audience. For he and his theater have literally brought up their audience these past 35 years. This was singled out as one of their greatest accomplishments by N. Krymova, and outstanding Soviet drama critic who was one of the "discoverers" of the Panevėžys. In an article, appropriately entitled "Secrets of the Panevėžys", published in the November 1965 issue of the magazine *Teatr*, she had this to say: "Today in Panevėžys the people can go calmly and confidently to the plays of Ibsen, Chekhov, Shakespeare, Miller and Hauptmann. The theater did its job. It trained its public. Step by step, slowly and with iron confidence that it was right and that this was how it had to be, it trained its public to its outlook, its repertoire, its tastes. It did not give in to circumstances, as was done by others. And now when many are complaining about the light-mindedness of the public which does not want to see serious plays, the Panevėžys Theater is assured on that score. It brought up its audience. It raised for itself an intelligent viewer, attentive, alive, committed to and respecting art." This is the meaning of the cultural revolution in the Soviet Union's 15 Republics.

### Turkmen Theater

Typical in this respect is the story of the Turkmen Theater. I saw the Turkmen Theater in Ashkhabad in 1971, but it is about the Turkmen Theater's 12-day performances in Moscow in June, 1974, that I want first to tell the reader, because this demonstrates more effectively than impressive statistics the TWO MAIN characteristics of the cultural revolution ushered in by the October Revolution: the renaissance of many national cultures and the development

of Soviet culture. At the 24th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union I heard Leonid Brezhnev, its General Secretary, stress that a new historical community, the Soviet people, had emerged. This fact is being ignored or misinterpreted by our free enterprise press (and most of its 26 correspondents stationed in Moscow) who to this day, more than half a century after the socialist Revolution, speak of this land of 100 nations and national groups and 15 Republics as RUSSIA. The only time they take note of this multitude of nations is when they report the supposed resistance to "Russification" and "suppression" of national cultures in the Baltics, the Ukraine, the Caucasian and Central Asian Republics, and, of course, among Soviet Jews.

I watched performances by the Turkmen Theater in the beautiful Moscow Art Theater that seats 1,800. For comparison one would have to imagine Lincoln Center Theater given over for a week to a Navajo Indian National Theater, performing to a New York audience in their own native language (with theater-goers listening to an English translation via earphones). But, then, to start with, one would have to imagine that Congress had appropriated funds and that our best theater and schools' directors had supplied the training and facilities necessary to create such an Indian theater. One would have to imagine that the rich culture and folklore of the Indian people were treasured and nourished by our Congress and the means provided to make it possible for it to flourish. One would have to imagine that our schools, cinema, radio, television and press had made it their business to acquaint our people with the cultural heritage of the Indian people. Unfortunately, no one knows better than the American people how hard it would be to imagine all this. It is because these things are not at all difficult to imagine in the Soviet Union (they are accepted realities unfortunately too often taken for granted by many Soviet people) that what I witnessed in Moscow that June week was possible.

Let me say that, much as I was impressed with the fact that the Moscow Art Theater made available its new lovely building to its Turkmen colleagues, it was not the building that was most meaningful to me. IT WAS THE MOSCOW AUDIENCE who nearly filled this large theater. And it wasn't just the attendance. It was the genuine interest in and warm feeling for the culture of a fraternal people that they exhibited. Moscow's is a highly sophisticated audience brought up on some of the world's best theaters. There was, of course, no attempt to unfairly judge the young Turkmen Theater by their standards. But, let me stress, I observed not the slightest sign of a patronizing attitude. The audience (and the critics) enjoyed the performances because the theater not only had something to say but because they said it in the Turkmen tongue and in the Turkmen way. And where there was criticism (and it was frankly levelled at other national theaters on tour in Moscow), it was directed against those plays which failed to fully draw on the rich material at hand. For example, an article in *Pravda* criticized the Azerbaijanian theater because it did not adequately reflect in the plays it performed the transformation in the life of Baku and the country wrought by the oil workers of Neftyanıye Kamni (Oil Rocks), the oil town in the Caspian Sea. I saw some performances by the Azerbaijanian theater, and the subject material, I felt, hardly adequately expressed the life I had observed in that Republic. And the epic story of the heroic oil workers, who daily defy the stormy Caspian to bring up the black gold, is, indeed, waiting to be told on the stage (I saw a film on the subject). I cite this example of Azerbaijan not to single out this Republic. Azerbaijan has a good theater, as I saw for myself in Baku. I note this to stress that honest CRITICISM, as well as deserved recognition, is regarded as a means of stimulating the renaissance of cultures. For example, the country-wide celebration of the 50th anniversary of the formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist



Republics served as the occasion not only for the presentation of national cultural festivals in theaters, over the radio and T.V. on a scale no other country in the world can match, but for a deep-going review of the cultural road travelled and the work being done by all the Republics. Thus, *Teatr*, the book-length monthly magazine solely devoted to the Soviet stage, reviewed during the entire year the work of the theaters of the Republics. Its November 1972 issue devoted 29 pages to dealing with various aspects of the Turkmen theater's development and to a critical estimation of its work.

The nearly two-week tours of groups like the Turkmen (among those who performed in Moscow in the summer of 1974 were the Azerbaijanian, Chuvash, Ukrainian and Lithuanian theaters) are followed by critical sessions participated in by leading Soviet directors, actors, literary critics and playwrights. Thus, the tours are, in addition to everything else, an important means of further stimulating the development of theater in the Soviet National Republics. It should be also stressed that they largely serve to enrich Moscow theater experience. Many of the national features of these theaters (and the new techniques they work out on the basis of their specific experience) contribute considerably to the development of theaters in Moscow and other great Soviet centers of culture. The Vane-muine Theater of Tartu, Estonia, and the Panevėžys Theater of Lithuania, and their greatly admired directors Kaarel Ird and Juozas Miltinis have greatly enriched the Moscow stage and Soviet theater as a whole.

But to get back to the Turkmen Theater. One of the plays I saw was the "Devil's Breed" by G. Mukhtarov. Mukhtarov's story was one that has been often told—the conflict that unfolds in a family when a late middle-aged father marries a young woman. It's a genuine love on both sides, but it nevertheless sets off family opposition, especially from the youngest daughter. What gave this oft-told tale interest and special flavor is that it was told

in distinctive Turkmen terms. The romantic lyrical style that is so much part of the Turkmen stage, expressed in unabashed poetic soliloquies and in plaintive lilting songs, gives this simple story its particular charm. You get to know and like this well-knit Turkmen family whose three generations (you fall in love with the wise and understanding grandfather and grandmother) find it hard to understand each other's ways but who are united (as are Soviet people) by the most human life they are building. You become familiar with the sentimental Turkmen people, whose emotions seem to get an extra charge from the hot desert sun, with some of their wise and beautiful customs and traditions to which they cling as they do to their colorful native dress, and you find yourself the richer for knowing them. You also get a peek into the backward "legacy" that also clings and which, you can see, will still require quite a struggle to overcome. The best proof of the play's overall success is that you not only find yourself liking the people it depicts but sorry to part with them. I should add as a footnote that you also are introduced to Turkmen humor. And it makes you realize how close to each other is the laughter of the Kara Kum desert and of the streets of New York. A good deal of the fun in the play is conveyed by Sona Muradova who bears the highest title, People's Artist of the USSR, and is a laureate. After seeing Muradova perform you know why. Muradova, incidentally, like many outstanding Soviet cultural figures, is also a deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. I spoke to her during intermission and she told me how delighted she was to get to know the American people when she visited our country in 1974 as part of a Soviet delegation.

I also saw "Keimir Ker" by C. Burunov and B. Amanov. It was staged by A. Kulmamedov, also People's Artist of the USSR and a laureate. This was a far more complex play to stage as well as to perform, and it provided a test of the maturity of the young Turkmen The-

ater. On the whole, it met that test quite well. Where the theater revealed it had not yet fully mastered the intricacies of the stage was in its inability to provide the necessary CONTINUITY OF MOVEMENT that is vital in order to knit together a fast-moving plot of many scenes. The result was that some of the impact of the play was lost due to its choppiness. But, notwithstanding this serious technical weakness, the play is interesting and moving and, I would add, highly informative in respect to an important period in Turkmen history. "Keimir Ker" is an historical play (it has a cast of 30 characters) that depicts the role played by one of Turkmenia's national heroes, Keimir Ker, a tribal chief who fought to unite his people then divided among the shah of Iran, the emir of Bukhara and the khan of Khiva. Ker, like other progressive leaders of divided peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia of that time, realized that, as much as they faced oppression from the tsars of Russia, their people needed the aid of a strong power like Russia to prevent perpetual dismemberment by the feudal potentates. The play tells the story of how Ker leads his people in a successful struggle to overthrow the domination of these potentates and to unify the Turkmen people. Ker is not portrayed as a "symbol". He is a flesh-and-blood character whose strength lies in his closeness to his people. The setting is the Kara Kum Desert, and the very vast empty parched wasteland (where a drop of water was a drop of gold, as the Turkmen saying put it) is very much part of the play. The tiny pitiful *kishlaks* (tent settlements) seemed to be swallowed up by the endless desert sands. The voices of the characters literally sound like echoes in this enveloping scorching void. It was a life of endless struggle with the desert, a ceaseless search for water. And the control over water was wielded like a club over the heads of the people by the feudal potentates and their beys. You see how the hard struggle of these nomadic people was made all the more bitter by the oppression that weighed

them down even more than the desert. You see how their beautiful young daughters are seized by the emir's henchmen to replenish his well-stocked harem, while their sons are impressed into his service. Recognizing Ker's leadership qualities, efforts are made to buy him off. But Ker becomes a national hero because there is no price the emirs and shahs could offer him that would make him sell his love for his people. This is the rich vein in Turkmen history that the playwrights tap and bring to life. I watched the Moscow audience as they followed the play. For one thing, it was clear that most were already familiar with much of Turkmen history. Then, too, a people who had their Stenka Razins and Pugachovs could readily understand and warm up to a Keimir Ker. But, above all, you sensed that much as this was strange to them, a half century of living together with the Turkmen people as part of the family of fraternal nations had drawn them closer to the history of the struggles of the Turkmen people. Theater, like cinema and television, you get to realize, are powerful instruments for uniting people through teaching them how much their histories have in common.

Not least of all, my contact with the Turkmen Theater gave me an insight into its history. And what made this history lesson particularly pleasant was that it was related to me by Ashir Mamiliev, director of the Turkmen Theater Section of the Republic's Ministry of Culture. Mamiliev, you could see, was in a way telling his own story. Turkmenia had no tradition of theater and before 1929 none ever existed. There were a few Russian drama groups in pre-revolutionary times, but these largely catered to the Russian population. But it would be wrong to conclude that ancient and pre-revolutionary Turkmenia lacked the elements around which theater could be developed, Mamiliev stressed. Turkmenia's "stage" was the desert aul where people gathered around *bakhshi*, roving troubadours who were story-tellers, sing-



ers, poets and actors, all rolled into one. Story-telling developed into a great art, and the *bakhshi* would hold their nomad audiences spellbound as they listened for two and three consecutive nights to the *destanye*, which amounted to a novel told in poetry and prose. It was on these elementary but deeply rooted theatrical forms that Turkmen dramatists, directors, actors and composers drew to create a theater which, while absorbing the experience of the great Russian stage and world classics, would be linked with their own cultural heritage. You could see the *bakhshi* influence in Turkmenia's plays about Soviet life today. Music and singing form an extremely important and natural part of the story told on the stage. In "The Devil's Breed", for example, the characters break out into song, instead of soliloquies, to speak their pieces. And it is not as in our musicals. It is all part of the play. What makes it so natural and charming is that you are prepared for the characters to break into song. It all adds to (and in no way detracts from) the action of the play and the continuity of the main story line. More, it contributes to the character development. I saw this in its more advanced form in Ashkhabad at a performance of a musical play by Durdi Nuriev, one of Turkmenia's most talented modern composers (Durdi is one of three brothers, all of whom are well-known composers). Nuriev drew on Turkmen folk melodies and songs (they are plaintive and yet stirring, reflecting Turkmen people's age-old struggle with desert and their oppressors) to tell a delightful love story reflecting the conflicts between the old and the new. Pre-revolutionary Turkmenia, though in a limited way because tsarism did nothing to eliminate mass illiteracy (less than one per cent of the population was literate), nevertheless, did benefit considerably from the influence of the great Russian literature, especially Pushkin. (This I found to be the case to one degree or another in all Soviet National Republics I visited). This great heritage also was drawn upon by the founders of Turkmen theater.

As everywhere in the vast expanse of the former tsarist empire, the October Revolution triggered off a cultural revolution unprecedented in history. In Turkmenia, as in Russia, the stage was part of the revolutionary front. Mixed dramatic groups—Turkmen, Uzbek and Russian—performed and fought together against the White Guard and British-supported *basmachis* forces. Thus, Turkmen theater was literally forged in the fires of revolutionary struggle. The rich material was at hand, awaiting the creative pen of budding playwrights. The early plays were of an *agit-prop* character—"little plays", as Mamiliev described them. They were as much part of the struggle as the songs with which revolutionary Turkmenia went forth to fight. From the front, Turkmen theater moved to the factories where amateur dramatic groups sprang up everywhere. It was on the basis of the best of these groups that the first dramatic studio was formed in 1926. As is the case with many theaters of the Soviet National Republics, the first cadre for the Turkmen stage was trained by the Moscow Art Theater. It was on the basis of a three-year school at the Moscow Art that the Turkmen National Theater was organized in 1929. "The treasure-house of the world-renowned Russian theater was made available to us!" Mamiliev exclaimed. "We owe a lot to this great Russian heritage and we are not ashamed to admit it. We fed at its bountiful source while we nourished ourselves with our own rich folklore. Ours is a synthesis of Russian realism and Turkmen people's art." Mamiliev paused a moment to let this succinct summary sink in and then continued. "Like Soviet theater in general, ours is based on the principles of socialist realism. But that hardly means stereotype. Each theater has its own style. This is true for Russian theaters, as you must know from your own experience. It is even more true for the theaters of National Republics, such as ours." Mamiliev paused again and asked me: "You saw our plays. Can you say they are just replicas of the plays you saw on

the Russian stage?" I shook my head. "They reflect our Turkmen traditions which reveal a bit more romantic, more poetic, one can even say more sentimental approach to life. Perhaps that is why music plays so great a role in our theater." Mamiliev thought a moment and then continued on this point. "I want to stress that the synthesis was organic not synthetic. It arose out of and developed on the basis of our common experience, our struggle TOGETHER to make the Revolution victorious, our struggle TOGETHER to defend our Revolution in the Civil War and against the nazi invasion, our work TOGETHER to reconstruct, and our building TOGETHER of our Communist future." Mamiliev recalled that I had visited his native Republic. "You saw what the building of the Kara Kum Canal has meant to our once water-hungry people. Well, it was constructed by 36 national groups WORKING TOGETHER to conquer the desert. This is the source of our cultural growth. This is the material which our dramatists draw on to produce plays about contemporary Turkmenia." I asked Mamiliev in what way the more advanced and more experienced Russian and other Soviet theaters were contributing to the development of Turkmen theater. "We are continuing to send students to GITIS (the State Institute of Theatrical Art—*Ed.*) and the Shchepkin theater school—there is a group of 25 right now studying in these Moscow schools. GITIS has opened another class for Turkmen students. Our students also study in Tashkent—there are five studios there. We invite prominent Soviet directors to stage plays at our theaters. And we have regular conferences and discussions organized by *Literaturnaya Gazeta* and *Teatr* magazine. And don't overlook our tours to Moscow and other Soviet cities—they are of tremendous importance to us. In addition to all the other benefits we derive from such tours—the honor and pleasure of performing in our Soviet capital, the inspiration that comes from wide public recognition and the lessons derived from comradely critical

evaluation of our performances—these visits to Moscow also keep us on our toes. I'll tell you frankly, we were quite nervous when we first came to Moscow—after all everyone knows how theater-wise Muscovites are. But now we are more confident, because we saw genuine approval in the eyes of our Moscow audiences." The confidence is revealed in the wide range of the theater's repertoire which includes Russian and world classics, as well as modern plays by Soviet and other dramatists. Incidentally, Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* is quite popular in Ashkhabad. It has been running for several years in the Turkmen capital. This little Republic of some three million, about equal in population to Los Angeles, has six full-time repertory theaters, including a children's theater (besides two philharmonic symphony orchestras). It needs hardly blush in comparing its cultural life to that of our country's third largest city. One can get some idea of the size of the permanent staff of Turkmenia's repertory theaters by the personnel of the Turkmen State Academic Theater which performed in Moscow. It has 60 actors and actresses and a total staff of 120.



## A Soviet Look at Russian History

Russian history, as well as the histories of the multinational Soviet people, occupy an important place in Soviet theatre. This first land of socialism, indeed, treats its tsars and departed nobles with the objectivity and understanding they never displayed for their former subjects. It portrays even the most barbaric of them not as monsters but as people of their times. It interprets them from the vantage point of history and with a contemporary eye. This is the view from the audience as well as the stage. Marxism-Leninism regards history as the story of the human struggle for a better way of life, as a struggle not only to live better, but to be better. The Soviet stage sees this striving even in the most cruel periods of history and even in those who themselves were the chief instruments of that cruelty. It is not an idealistic but a historical, materialist approach to history. It is this human view of men in power that makes Shakespeare's kings and lords alive today. Perhaps one of the best examples of this approach is illustrated in the Soviet presentation of the classic plays (the largest part of a tri-

logy) by Alexei Konstantinovich Tolstoy (1818-1875) "The Death of Ivan the Terrible" and "Tsar Fyodor Ioanovich". "Tsar Boris", the third play, seems to lack the theatrical powers of the other two and was never staged. It is unfortunate that this Tolstoy, who is not related to the other two famous Tolstoys, Lev and Alexei, and who preceded them, is largely unknown in our country. These two plays have the kind of philosophic universality and depth of character that remind one of Shakespeare. You not only learn a great deal about Russian history from these plays but about human beings. The tsar and his warring boyars emerge as people who not only reflect the cruel and transitional nature of their times, but as pitiful creatures propelled into action by powerful forces not only beyond their control, but understanding.

I saw "Tsar Fyodor Ioanovich" at the Maly Theater twice—the first time before I had seen "The Death of Ivan the Terrible", which opens the trilogy. I appreciated the former much more the second time. For one thing, the rough spots displayed on the opening night were worked out, and it seemed to me the play itself was tightened up. But the primary reason was that seeing it in its sequence gave me a much better understanding even though each play can well stand on its own feet. "The Death of Ivan the Terrible" is staged by the Soviet Army Theatre and is one of its most popular productions. The cast as a whole performed excellently, and the play is distinguished by Andrei Popov's masterful portrayal of Tsar Ivan. Tolstoy's Tsar is not only terrible but pitiful and there is a Dostoyevsky-like co-existence and interaction of these two contradictory qualities. This duality is fully captured by Popov.

There is the forceful and moving scene where the Tsar begs the nobles, whom he tyrannized, for forgiveness only to reassert his absolute power the next minute. This Dostoyevskian duality is revealed in the opening scene when

the Tsar, conscience-stricken and momentarily overcome by his murder of his eldest son in a fit of rage, announces that he is going to give up his throne. The feuding nobles are gathered to discuss this crisis. Much as they fear and hate the Tsar, they realize they need him to unify Russia and to defend her from the encroaching enemies. Ivan is not long in giving them good reason to bitterly regret their decision.

Tolstoy's Ivan is hardly a figure relegated to the museum of history. It does not take much to recognise some of the more tragic lessons of contemporary history in this powerful scene, which is forcefully portrayed on the Soviet Army Theater's stage. An ailing, superstitious tsar feels death coming and sends for his boyars and Fyodor, his son. Fyodor (the hero of the second and even more powerful play in the trilogy) is terrified, not so much out of love for his tyrannical father as out of fear of the throne he must occupy. "Choose someone else, I'm not made to be a Tsar," Fyodor pleads with Ivan. The absolute ruler cries out in rage against his "weak-willed" son. The Tsar summons an aged, holy monk for blessing and advice. The monk tells Ivan to depend on his loyal subjects. The Tsar blankly stares at the old man as if to say: "What loyal subjects?" The monk proceeds to enumerate a long list of boyars who faithfully served the Tsar and Russia. To each name the conscience-stricken Tsar replies: "I executed him!" Then the monk courageously refuses to bless the Tsar and tells him: "Only God can forgive you."

In its philosophic outlook and in the memorable character, Fyodor, "Tsar Fyodor Ioanovich" is the more moving play in my opinion. It is very effectively staged by Boris Ravenskikh, Maly's chief director. Tsar Fyodor is like Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin ("The Idiot"), with absolute power. And like Dostoyevsky's Christ-like Prince, he brings love and tragedy in his wake. Fyodor was a Tsar who never wanted to be a ruler. Where Shakespeare's

tragedies of his English kings are summed up in his profound words, "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown", Tolstoy's are "how troubled is the mind of a tsar who wears a crown he never wanted". The celebrated Soviet actor Innokenty Smoktunovsky (for many years a member of the acclaimed Leningrad Dramatic Theatre named after Gorky) portrays the tragic Tsar with every gesture, with his resigned lifeless posture and especially with his walk. It is a walk that epitomizes Fyodor's painful and unwilling acceptance of the awesome power thrust on him. From the moment Smoktunovsky appears on the stage clad in his flowing, loose, white robe you are in the presence of a "saint".

This is most movingly illustrated in the final scene. The dying Tsar mumbles his last prayers and cries out like a lost child in the arms of his wife Irina: "Oh Lord, why did you make me Tsar!" A similar aching appeal was sounded by the Maid of Orleans in Shaw's immortal "St. Joan": "Oh, God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive Thy Saints?" For the audience Smoktunovsky's dying Tsar was not just a tragic ruler, but the embodiment of man's universal striving for goodness and kindness. The play's universality is particularly expressed in the philosophic thought: how difficult it is to be both GOOD and STRONG. It is a theme that has been dealt with in various forms by the great thinkers, poets and philosophers throughout the ages. And some of the most beautiful and most memorable characters in world literature—Dostoyevsky's Alyosha Karamazov and Myshkin, Tolstoy's Pierre Bezukhov, Melville's Billy Budd, Nikolai Ostrovsky's Pavel Korchagin—are living symbols of that eternal human effort. They live with us, because nothing is as uplifting as a human being's struggle to be good and to do good. And when it ends in tragedy (as it often does) the sense of painful loss acts like a cleansing catharsis. One leaves the theater with a more profound understanding of the meaning of the term



"human being". The ability to create such unforgettable experience represents theater at its best.

Theater can and should be exciting, entertaining, satirical. But, above all, theater is catharsis, a cleansing of the soul, as the ancient Greeks so well understood. Theater is a collective experience in such a soul-cleansing and, as such, is a unique forum in the eternal human striving to be good and to do good. And this is what one experiences in seeing Tolstoy's two plays. If there is a serious weakness in contemporary Soviet plays, it does not lie in its "old-fashioned" character (as some of our critics assert) or in its clinging to its past great tradition. On the contrary, I felt Soviet theater was strongest when it breathed the inspiring warmth of these great traditions, when it addressed itself to contemporary problems in that spirit. Russian literature and Russian theater were, above all, distinguished by their profound humanity, their extraordinary combination of unabashed, deep feeling for people, psychological and philosophic probing and masterful artistry. The contemporary Soviet plays that left me cold were those which lost this most important quality that has made Russian literature known and loved throughout the world. Soviet theater is strongest when, basing itself on those great traditions of its past, it addresses itself with the same uplifting sweep to problems confronted today in man's striving to live better and to be better. This theme is as contemporary today as it has been throughout the ages. But in Soviet society it is not only expressed in man's yearning for a better way of living but in struggle to improve a way of life already in process of realization. In this struggle Soviet theater plays a significant role.

Soviet theater's greatest challenge, I believe, lies not so much in the search for new theatrical forms (as some seem to believe and stress) as in the creation of beautiful and unforgettable characters who depict this struggle in contemporary terms. This challenge has not yet been

adequately met, notwithstanding some excellent plays by such playwrights as Rozov, Volodin, Vampilov, Roshchin. Many of the Soviet contemporary plays I saw were very good and dealt with vital themes, but I must honestly say that few left me as profoundly moved as when I left the Maly after seeing "Tsar Fyodor". Contemporary Soviet playwrights have yet to create characters that live with you, such as Tolstoy's Fyodor, Dostoyevsky's Alyosha and Myshkin, Gorky's Satin ("Lower Depths"), Fadeyev's Levinson, Nikolai Ostrovsky's Pavel Korchagin, Sholokhov's Grigory Melekhov and Davydov. I firmly believe they will, because Soviet life has already created more than enough material with which to fashion unforgettable prototypes of Soviet reality. I have met them.

But to get back to A. K. Tolstoy. Tolstoy's tsars and nobles are very Russian in their directness, their open-hearted expression of affection and their whole-hearted fury. His princes and lords, even when conspiring, are quite unlike Shakespeare's British nobles in this sense. One could hardly imagine them acting as Prince Shuisky or Tsar Fyodor (they would be out of character). Shuisky boldly confesses to the Tsar that he had been hatching a plot to overthrow him and to replace Fyodor with his brother Tsarevich Dmitry. Instead of flying into a rage and ordering his execution (as he was urged by Boris Godunov) Fyodor whispers to Shuisky: "Wait a little longer—let Dmitry grow up a bit. Then I'll willingly give up the throne to him." It is all said with such sincerity and simplicity. Shuisky is overwhelmed. "You are a saint. Your simplicity is a gift from God," he cries out as he falls to the ground before the Tsar's feet.

Tolstoy's plays like Pushkin's "Boris Godunov" delve deeply into a critical and turbulent period of Russian history. Tsar Fyodor's efforts to bring a "Christian" peace between the two powerful and strong-willed boyars, Boris Godunov and Ivan Shuisky, prove fruitless. On all sides Russia cries out for unity and a strong ruler; it is being

ripped apart by feudal strife, while invading enemies are at Moscow's gates. Russia is in the painful struggle for the formation of its nationhood.

The music, incidentally, blends ideally with "Tsar Fyodor Ioanovich": it is saintly and tragic, almost too beautiful for the hard, divided earth that tormented feudal Russia was. The sets are like works of art transported from the Tretyakov Gallery to the Maly stage. Hovering over the tragedy are the silhouettes of "Holy Russia", the sky-reaching church spires and the orthodox cross. The Soviet stage demonstrates not only how socialist society treasures and preserves the cultural contributions of past societies but what vast dimensions it gives them. A. K. Tolstoy, as Lev Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Ostrovsky and Chekhov, and many others, would weep with joy if they could see how their works are being interpreted and brought to the people. A. K. Tolstoy never saw his plays produced during his lifetime.

"Tsar Fyodor" was first staged in St. Petersburg in 1898, but it was the great team of Russian drama, Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky, who really brought it to a memorable life on October 14, 1898. It was "Tsar Fyodor Ioanovich" which launched the great Moscow Art Theatre. The choice was not at all accidental. This was the kind of pulsating, probing, profoundly human drama that expressed the essence of theater the two geniuses of the Russian stage were out to create. In the delightful, nostalgic museum of the Moscow Art Theater, I pored over a letter Nemirovich-Danchenko had written to Stanislavsky, strongly suggesting that "Tsar Fyodor" be staged. "I do not know of another literary figure, not excluding Hamlet, which is so close to my soul," Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote. "I will try to give to the actors all the feelings and thoughts which this play arouses in me." That he and Stanislavsky did just that with tremendous success it testified by the wild acclaim the play received. In addition to launching the Moscow Art Theater

to fame, it gave to Russia and the world the great actor, Ivan Moskvina, who played the title role, and the great actress Olga Knipper, who was his tsarina. One still hears raves over Moskvina's Fyodor. The play became one of the gems of the theater's repertoire for many years.

"Tsar Fyodor" is hardly an easy play to stage for one must not only be a great actor but a genius like Moskvina (or Smoktunovsky) to play that role. To make things still worse Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky had the tsarist censor to contend with, as well as the dramatic difficulties. For 30 years, from 1868 to 1898, the play was kept on tsarist ice. I read the curt sentence to exile pronounced by the tsar's Minister of Internal Affairs (written 1868) who declared: "I found the tragedy 'Tsar Fyodor Ioanovich' impossible to put on the stage.' The censor's "blue" pencil was still quite in evidence 30 years later, as the facsimile of some of the play's pages testified. But, the censor notwithstanding, one of the great classics of the Russian theater was born on the stage of the Moscow Art at the close of the 19th century.

A. K. Tolstoy wrote in the great humanist tradition of Russian literature. Though he was never connected with any democratic movements and even opposed revolutionary ideology as being directed against religion, family, state and property and art, both his works and his deeds were in the democratic, as well as humanist tradition. His plays "The Death of Tsar Ivan the Terrible" and "Tsar Fyodor Ioanovich" reveal this, and it was not by chance that the tsars did not permit them to be staged before 1898. A. K. Tolstoy came from the high ranks of Russian aristocracy and was close to Alexander II. He was in the government service, which he hated, and finally succeeded in escaping. He spoke out when Turgenev was confined by the Tsar to a prescribed area, protested against the exile of Chernyshevsky and opposed the reaction and terror. A. K. Tolstoy was a Slavophile and be-



lieved in the greatness of the virtues of old Russian traditions and customs. This is revealed in his "Tsar Fyodor" where his sympathies clearly lie with Prince Ivan Shuisky who opposed an opening to the West and Western influences and stood for preservation of the old Russian ways of life.

The Soviet attitude to A. K. Tolstoy is in keeping with the approach first outlined by Lenin: it regards the great works of such writers as a fundamental part of the Soviet people's cultural heritage. He is evaluated objectively and quite favorably, as the high esteem for and great popularity of these two plays demonstrate. This objective attitude toward Tsars and even White Guards (as the continued popularity of Bulgakov's "Days of the Turbins", one of the gems of the Moscow Art's repertoire, reveals) is in stark contrast to the tendentious approach to literature, theater and cinema in our country. One would search in vain for an objective treatment of Soviet socialist society, not to speak of Soviet or U.S. Communist leaders, on our stage or screen.

## Conflict in Life and on Stage Under Socialism

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The theater I saw was at its best in reflecting the past, the making and winning of the socialist revolution. This is demonstrated in a number of plays which, I am convinced, would stir U.S. audiences as they have Soviet theater-goers. Among these are Taganka's "Ten Days That Shook the World", the Vakhtangov Theater's "Mounted Army" and "The Man With the Rifle", the Sovremennik's "Decembrists", "Narodniki", and "Bolsheviks", the Mayakovsky Theater's "Rout", and the Moscow Art's "Days of the Turbins", Mikhail Bulgakov's powerful depiction of the Revolution as it affected its opponents. Soviet theater also is extremely rich and effective in portraying Russian and world classics as well as contemporary plays by dramatists of all countries. Among those I found particularly forceful were the Vakhtangov Theater's dramatization of Dostoyevsky's "The Idiot", the Maly Theater's "Power of Darkness" by Lev Tolstoy, "Tsar Fyodor Ioanovich" by A. K. Tolstoy, Gerhardt Hauptmann's "Before Sunset", the Soviet Army Theater's "The Death of Ivan the

Terrible", and the Moscow Art's "Village of Stepanchikovo" (Dostoyevsky's Russian Tartuffe). The Mayakovsky Theater's interpretations of A. N. Ostrovsky's "Talents and Admirers" and "Children of Vanyushin" by Naidyonov, the Mossoviet's dramatization of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* ("St. Petersburg Dreams"). Brecht is widely performed. Nowhere have I seen a better interpretation of Brecht's "Good Woman of Szechwan" and "Galileo" than at the Taganka. Durrenmatt, Anouilh and Shaw are also quite popular with Soviet theater-goers. The Malaya Bronnaya Theater offers the deeply moving "Brother Alyosha", a play based on Dostoyevsky's "The Karamazov Brothers" by Victor Rozov, one of the most talented of contemporary Soviet dramatists who, unfortunately, is all too little known in the U.S. I'll have more to say later about "Brother Alyosha", and Anatoly Efros, its director.

There are a number of excellent Soviet contemporary plays and, from what I have observed, they seem to be steadily improving in quality. And some, which I shall deal with later, are beginning to effectively grapple with the main theme of Soviet life today—the construction of communism and the molding of communist man and woman. But I honestly believe that Soviet theater has not yet hit its full stride on this theme of the present and climatic phase of the October Revolution. And when it does, as I am convinced it will, it will reveal to the world the exciting and purposeful essence of contemporary Soviet life. To achieve this, Soviet theater faces many problems, aside from subjective weaknesses. The problems linked with the fight for the construction of communist society, as I noted earlier, are far more complex and far more difficult to dramatize than the turbulent *Ten Days That Shook the World*, or the struggle for survival in the Civil War and the Great Patriotic War.

There is, I believe, another factor. As anyone familiar with even the elementary aspects of the stage knows,

CONFLICT is the motive force of a play. (There are exceptions to this, as to every rule, but these are exceptions). Without conflict, and sharp conflict at that, there is no play. On this score there exists no problem in our conflict-ridden society. There is plenty of material at hand. And because of the exploiting, racist, inhuman, immoral character of our "free enterprise" society, no dramatist worth his or her salt can create any effective work without dramatizing the personal and social conflicts as CONFLICTS AGAINST THE EXISTING SOCIETY. This is the case, irrespective of the political viewpoint of the writer (or even whether he or she is consciously in conflict with capitalist society), though political outlook has much to do with how a writer sees the resolution of the contradictions. Socialist society is the first in human history where the mass of the people are not in conflict with their social system. On the contrary, they are overwhelmingly in support of it. Why should they be in conflict with a society or a government which has eliminated exploiters, which has eradicated racism and national discrimination and practices Brotherhood every day, instead of celebrating it one week a year, which provides free and full medical care, which is well on the road to being the first in history to solve the housing problem? Why should they be in conflict with a society that opens wide the doors of education to its children and youth and subsidizes their studies? Why should they struggle against a society which has launched a peace offensive that is defrosting the iceberg of the cold war, which is the bulwark of all peoples fighting for national liberation? Why should they be in conflict with a society which is moving towards communism, a society based on the principle "from each according to his ability to each according to his needs"?

The answer is the same for life AND THE STAGE. In life, there is no struggle of the people against Soviet society, and no effort on the part of our free enterprise press to manufacture such conflict on the thin gruel of



the writings of a handful of dwindling dissenters or by crowning Solzhenitsyn the "conscience of Russia" can conceal the fact that no society in history ever enjoyed the overwhelming active support of its people as does Soviet society. Thus, the play whose function, among other things, as Shakespeare so well put it, is to "hold a mirror to nature", has to honestly reflect the new reality in human society that is the Soviet Union and socialism. Any effort to manufacture a conflict AGAINST Soviet society is not only politically counter-revolutionary, it is artistically dishonest. No enduring great work—no matter how greatly praised by those who base their critical acumen on anti-Sovietism—can be created on such dishonesty.

In the early years following the victory of the October Revolution, some sections of the population were in sharp conflict with the new society precisely because they resisted the revolutionary process of transformation. And at times because of mistakes made in the difficult process of pioneering the path to socialist construction. These conflicts were profoundly and truthfully portrayed in Soviet literature and with an objectivity rarely displayed by our "free world" in respect to communism, in such works as Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don*, and *Virgin Soil Upturned*, Bulgakov's *Days of the Turbins*, and *Flight, Ordeal*, by Alexei Tolstoy. Today only a tiny handful still opposes socialist society.

Is there conflict in Soviet society today? Of course. Life without conflict is not life. Socialism does not do away with all conflicts and its great theorists—Marx, Engels, Lenin—never made any such claims. Socialism only (quite an ONLY) eliminates the destructive conflict between man and society, the ruinous struggle between different and opposing classes. Those in the West, who dismiss Soviet dramatists and writers generally as conformists, are not asking them to deal with the EXISTING conflicts in present-day Soviet life. They are actually demanding of them that they take up cudgels AGAINST

socialist society as PROOF of their artistic honesty and independence. With their classless approach to society (not really, since its source, whether they are conscious of it or not, is the dominant bourgeois outlook), they are demanding that Soviet writers, too, struggle against the "Establishment". As long as this intolerant and arrogant attitude is maintained in respect to Soviet theater and literature, it will be difficult to open wide the channels to a mutually enriching cultural exchange.

The conflicts that exist in Soviet life are as many and varied as human beings. There are the conflicts of family life, the battle of the sexes, problems existing between generations, problems between managers of industry, of collective and state farms, and workers and farmers, the struggle against bureaucracy, careerism and self-seeking, the fight against immorality, philistinism, drunkenness, and, yes, crime. But all these conflicts take place in an entirely new setting—in a society that itself does not nourish these human vices and weaknesses but, on the contrary, has to a considerable extent minimized them. Moreover, it is a society that provides the basis for overcoming these social ills and itself organizes that struggle against them. IT IS THIS FEATURE THAT IS NEW AND THAT DISTINGUISHES SOCIALIST SOCIETY FROM OUR OWN AND ALL PREVIOUS SOCIETIES IN HISTORY. Thus, Soviet dramatists (and writers, generally) and the Soviet stage have to and do deal with CONFLICT in an entirely new way. At the same time, it should be remembered that they are breaking new ground for theater and literature and it is understandable if they at times stumble or are unsteady in their pioneering. But much of the fault in judging Soviet theater lies with the fault-finders in the West, many of whom without knowing much about Soviet theater or taking the trouble to become acquainted with it, insist on judging it by our free enterprise standards. They fail to understand that in the Soviet Union, for the first time in history, literature and

the theater can be creative in CO-OPERATION WITH—RATHER THAN IN CONFLICT AGAINST—SOCIETY. It's the failure on the part of many honest people to grasp this all-significant NEW ROLE of the arts and literature made possible by a socialist society that has aided enemies of the Soviet Union and socialism to seal off many of the creative works being produced in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries from our own people and to give a distorted picture of Soviet literature.

I discussed this question with Tovstonogov at the 15th Congress of the International Theater Institute in Moscow. Tovstonogov noted that the contradictions still existing in Soviet society center around the struggle to raise the level of the relationship between the individual and society. Soviet society poses that relationship as one in which the good of society, the welfare of the collective, stands above the narrow interests of individuals. It's a conflict between the individualism bred by past societies and the "general welfare" approach spoken of in the preamble of our own U.S. constitution. Tovstonogov readily agreed that the task of depicting conflict in socialist society is thus much harder to deal with. "Conflicts have to be genuine and sharply posed—without that you have no play," Tovstonogov pointed out. He agreed that this is one of the most difficult problems faced by Soviet dramatists. These conflicts and problems are being tackled by Soviet dramatists and theaters (as well as by writers and artists generally), in cinema and television. Though this is being done effectively in some plays, I must add, Soviet theater has still to hit its stride in this respect. Soviet theater has a new and, in many ways, a more complex front of struggle and, hence, more complex characters and problems to grapple with than in the early years of the Revolution and Civil War. Today the front-line fighter, the contemporary hero or heroine, is the most advanced worker and farmer, overfulfilling his or her five-year plans to create the material and technical basis for communism.

Many in the West, including close sympathizers of socialism, underestimate the significance and the difficulties involved in this less glamorous and seemingly "less" revolutionary activity as especially inexperienced youth influenced by ultra-Left phraseology regard the daily grind in factory and field.

Here let me deal at some length with this all-important question since it not only has much to do with one of the focal points of the 24th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union but with what is happening on the Soviet stage today. Many, including some supporters of socialism in capitalist countries, find it difficult to comprehend why there is such concentration by the Soviet Communist Party and the entire Soviet society on economic questions. Bourgeois and revisionist critics even charge that the Communist Party "meddles" too much in economic affairs. This only reveals their failure to grasp the essential difference between capitalist and socialist society. This difference was repeatedly and forcefully stressed by Lenin. In one of his articles Lenin noted that for the first time in modern history of civilized nations a government (Soviet Government—*Ed.*) gave PRIORITY TO ECONOMICS, NOT POLITICS. . . . The very ESSENCE of Soviet government, like the very essence of Soviet society, he wrote, consists in that POLITICAL TASKS ARE PLACED IN SUBORDINATION TO ECONOMIC TASKS.

How much truer this is today when political consolidation has long been accomplished and the task before the Soviet people is to create the material and technical basis of communist society. The construction of communism can only be achieved by the most democratic involvement of the masses of workers in problems of production. Thus, Lenin gave quite a different evaluation of the significance of the daily economic grind where, as he pointed out, the ground has to be "won inch by inch". And Lenin went on to spell out clearly what this means. "Labor must be



organized in a new way; new ways of stimulating people to work and to observe labor discipline must be devised. . . . Given the political conditions, power can be retained by the sheer enthusiasm of the workers, perhaps even in the face of the whole world. That we have proved. But the creation of new forms of social discipline requires decades. Even capitalism required many decades to transform the old system of organization" (my emphasis, *M.D.*—Speech delivered at the Third All-Russia Trade Union Congress, April 7, 1920. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 30, pp. 507-508).

One of the reasons so many "get rich quick" revolutionaries in the West turn so quickly against socialist countries AFTER the triumph of the revolution is because they have no idea of the significance of Lenin's words, they do not realize that the most difficult and most complex task is the "creation of new forms of labor discipline".

The Soviet Union was the first country in history where the working people worked WITHOUT THE WHIP. Lenin characterized this historical development as the "greatest change in human history" ("How to Organize Competition?", 1917). Lenin elaborated on this point in a later article as follows: "The feudal organization of social labor rested on the discipline of the bludgeon, while the working people, robbed and tyrannized by a handful of landowners, were utterly ignorant and downtrodden. The capitalist organization of social labor rested on the discipline of hunger, and, notwithstanding all the progress of bourgeois culture and bourgeois democracy, the vast mass of the working people in the most advanced, civilized and democratic republics remained an ignorant and downtrodden mass of wage-slaves or oppressed peasants, robbed and tyrannized by a handful of capitalists. The communist organization of social labor, the first step towards which is socialism, rests, AND WILL DO SO MORE AND MORE as time goes on, on the FREE AND

CONSCIOUS DISCIPLINE OF THE WORKING PEOPLE THEMSELVES who have thrown off the yoke both of the landowners and capitalists.

"THIS NEW DISCIPLINE DOES NOT DROP FROM THE SKIES, NOR IS IT BORN FROM PIOUS WISHES. . . . CLEARLY, IN ORDER to abolish classes completely, it is not enough to overthrow the exploiters, the landowners and capitalists, not enough to abolish THEIR rights of ownership; it is necessary also to abolish ALL private ownership of the means of production, it is necessary to abolish the distinction between town and country, as well as the distinction between manual workers and brain workers. THIS REQUIRES A VERY LONG PERIOD OF TIME. In order to achieve this an enormous step forward must be taken in developing the productive forces; it is necessary to overcome the resistance (frequently passive, which is particularly stubborn and particularly difficult to overcome) of the numerous survivals of small-scale production; IT IS NECESSARY TO OVERCOME THE ENORMOUS FORCE OF HABIT AND CONSERVATISM WHICH ARE CONNECTED WITH THESE SURVIVALS. . . . IT REQUIRES THE MOST PROLONGED, MOST PERSISTENT AND MOST DIFFICULT MASS HEROISM IN PLAIN, EVERY-DAY WORK." (My emphasis, *M.D.*—"A Great Beginning", 1919, Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 29, pp. 419-23).

I took the liberty to quote Lenin at such length because, without grasping this, it is not possible to really understand what the all-out push toward communist construction, the essence of Soviet life today, is all about. And without such an understanding one cannot grasp the present-day role of Soviet theater and culture in general. Bourgeois propagandists prey on this lack of understanding in the West to portray Soviet writers, and intelligentsia generally, as lifeless automatons, as writing and creating by dictation.

The all-important point that has to be grasped is this:

the Vakhtangov credo as applied today, above all, means that Soviet theater must concentrate on the front of the struggle for a COMMUNIST ATTITUDE to work, for new and higher standards of morals in keeping with the advance toward communism. This sounds easy enough as a slogan. But no one who has not LIVED in a socialist society can imagine what this takes, what this entails in terms of daily living, daily working, in transforming age-old habits, in overcoming accustomed ways of thinking bred by centuries of capitalist and feudal societies that still cling to people.

In our society it is FEAR, fear of losing one's job if one does not produce to the satisfaction of the employer, that is the motive force of labour productivity and labor discipline. In the Soviet Union, for more than half a century workers have produced without that whip of fear. The capitalist world, above all, based its prediction of a speedy and inevitable collapse of the first socialist state on the premise that the Communists were trying to do the impossible, that they were going against HUMAN NATURE, when they set the goal of working without the capitalist whip. Bourgeois correspondents and ideologists seized on every difficulty, every problem, every setback in the process of making this historic transformation in man and society (and they still do), to justify their "predictions". However, it is difficult to still cling to these predictions today when the Soviet Union and many new socialist countries have demonstrated what can be accomplished by people working without the capitalist whip, with the consciousness that the fruits of their labor will benefit not a handful of exploiters but the people as a whole.

I have visited many factories, farms, mines, shops. What impressed me most was the atmosphere (so different from ours) one finds in Soviet places of work, the new kind of a working man and woman who feel themselves the masters of their enterprise, because they really are. This

is, first and foremost, reflected in the widespread movement for working in the spirit of communist labor, that is, working for the good of society as a whole by setting a PERSONAL EXAMPLE. In every plant I came across a sea of little red pennants fluttering over huge machines (usually also adorned with flowers). These were being operated by members of Communist Work teams.

But old habits, old concepts, understandably still cling to some people. They reveal themselves in poor labor discipline, in drunkenness, in loafing on the job. The problem is being openly discussed in the Soviet press as it was at the 24th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. And it was frankly dealt with in Brezhnev's probing speech in Tashkent in September 1973. Such problems, of course, are quite easily "solved" in our capitalist society: the WHIP, DISMISSAL FROM THE JOB, NO WORK WITH ALL THE CONSEQUENCES TO THE WORKER AND HIS FAMILY.

But, above all, socialism is a HUMAN SOCIETY, a workers' society. The Soviet Constitution, article 118 states: "Citizens of the USSR have the right to work, that is, the right to GUARANTEED EMPLOYMENT." This is no pious proclamation with which we, in our country, are all too familiar. THIS IS IMPLEMENTED IN LIFE. The entire world knows that since 1930 the Soviet Union has been free of that most inhuman of capitalist curses—UNEMPLOYMENT. Thus, for the first time in history, the problem of labor discipline is being solved THE HUMAN WAY. And the Soviet Union's impressive record in production on every front speaks for itself. But the struggle is a continuous one. One of the chief tasks of socialist society is to steadily cultivate the communist attitude toward labor in preparation for communist society. This is being done in many ways, and every instrument of society is mobilized to achieve this goal—schools, literature, the cinema, theater.

One of the most effective instruments in this respect



is public recognition of and tribute to exemplary workers. If one would ask me what is it that, in the first place, is replacing the profit motive as the major INCENTIVE for production and doing one's utmost in every field, I would say: it is the honor paid to the Soviet Union's real heroes—Heroes of Labor. Recognition in the eyes of one's fellow-men has always been a powerful incentive—even in our capitalist society. But here, the values have become so distorted and the dollar so predominant, it is largely stifled and warped in people. In the Soviet Union it is flourishing, because it is the BASIC standard of judgement of people.

But, by the same token, public disapproval, is the other side of the coin in promoting incentive. And this tool, too, is being sharpened as the Soviet Union advances toward communism.

I have heard this point frankly and openly discussed in plants and farms, at the 16th Komsomol Congress and at the 24th Congress of the CPSU. And it was recently dealt with (in the typical forthright fashion I heard it expressed earlier by shop workers) by Leonid Brezhnev in his hard-hitting speech on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Formation of the USSR. Here is how Brezhnev put the question: "As the active creative initiative of the people, socialist emulation requires not only that foremost workers be given every support and encouragement but also that the identity of those who lag behind or work less than conscientiously be made known. This must be done publicly so that people will know not only about those who work conscientiously and energetically but also about those who work in a lackadaisical fashion, without enthusiasm." Everyone has to pull his or her load along the difficult but rewarding road to communism. This is the attitude taken in the Soviet Union. It involves a complex struggle, the outcome of which is producing people with a communist attitude toward labor. And it is on this key problem, this decisive FRONT, that

Soviet theater and Soviet writers generally are striving to concentrate. The pages of *Literaturnaya Gazeta* are constantly filled with vivid probing reports by Soviet writers on their visits to the key industrial and agricultural areas. A new type of journalism—creative, artistic, in-depth reporting on the battle for production, culture, and the molding of communist man and woman—is developing. It is profoundly affecting writer-reader relations. Communist society is the goal for which millions of Soviet people laid down their lives. It was to draw nearer to this summit that they endured a half century of struggle and so much sacrifice, registered hard-won achievements in all spheres of life, engaged in unprecedented construction and brought about a cultural revolution. The Soviet people, and that includes the Soviet intelligentsia, are not playing games. The goal is too precious, too dear and TOO NEAR for that. Is it any wonder then that all rights and responsibilities, whether on the production line, in the field, in the university or science laboratory or in the theater, are assessed not in the abstract but in relation to what is being done to achieve the full realization of the socialist revolution—Communism.

It is a dedication born out of the October Revolution and forged in the fires of incredible ordeals and sacrifices. Lacking any remotely comparable experiences, many intellectuals in our undedicated society find this hard to understand. They find it difficult to grasp that Soviet intellectuals never were and never will be non-partisan in the historic struggles to build a communist society.

## Soviet Theater in the Struggle for Communist Man and Woman

Thus, Soviet theater, as always, is today on the battle front in the struggle for communist man and woman. And more and more it is addressing itself to the complex problems that must be tackled in the struggle for a communist attitude to work. It is doing this realistically and honestly. For example, the Sovremennik Theater spent several days in close contact with auto workers in the Togliatti plant before it began work on "The Weather for Tomorrow", a play about auto workers by Shatrov. This candid probing approach is revealed in two recent plays. They are "The Man from Outside" by Ignaty Dvoretzky, staged by Efros at the Malaya Bronnaya Theater and "Steelworkers" by Gennady Bokarev, a new and promising playwright. "Steelworkers", directed by Oleg Yefremov made its successful debut at the Moscow Art Theater in 1973.

The two plays complement each other, though they approach the problem from opposite angles. "The Man from Outside", centers around the hero's efforts to overcome inertia and resistance to the fight for individual responsibility. It focuses on the conflict between a young, determined man of the times and workers of an older

generation out of tune with the times. It hits hard at inefficiency, big talk and little action, exaggerated promises and deceptive "fulfilment" of plans. It deals frankly with some of the knotty contemporary problems faced in the struggle for a communist attitude to work. The audience lived the play and the response was the best proof that it was striking at real problems. You could hear a pin drop when the hero summed up the issue. It was as if the audience were listening to its own conscience. "We are all working for our country, for our people, for each other, and we must work honestly and deal with each other and ourselves and our problems honestly. The worst thing is deception, to deceive each other and ourselves." This is a liberal paraphrase of the hero's concluding remarks.

The play is sharply directed not only against those who falsify reports but against those who excuse the falsifiers on the ground that they are good people who sacrificed and struggled in the difficult days of the country. It portrays them not as malicious individuals or self-seekers but as people who have not kept pace with the increasing demands of a rapidly advancing economy and the scientific and technological revolution. The play ends with "the man from outside" (after considerable struggle) getting his co-workers to take the first step—recognition of their weaknesses.

"Steelworkers" carries the struggle for a communist attitude to work one step further. And it does this with its eyes wide open as to the human difficulties this entails. It does not glamorize or idealize the "heroes" in that struggle. The play takes you to the hottest front (literally)—the open hearth furnace of a giant steel mill. It is concerned not with how steel is produced but how the makers of steel are themselves being tempered in a society where for the first time in history they are truly masters of their plants. The "new" masters are still weighed down by old habits that hinder them in the decisive effort to reach and overtake the most advanced capitalist countries



in labor productivity. It is this hurdle that socialist society must leap not only to clinch its triumphant competition with capitalist society but to provide the abundance which makes communist society possible. "Steelworkers" shows how this is being done—by the stubborn, selfless struggle led by the new worker, created by Soviet society, who labors not only for his wages but for the common good. It is this quality that Lenin singled out as the key to developing a communist attitude to work.

"Steelworkers" presents a prototype of such a worker—Victor Lagutin. A graduate engineer, Lagutin, who could have had an administrative position, asks for and is assigned to a job at one of the most difficult and decisive sectors of production—the open hearth furnace. His father was one of the founding workers of the steel mill. But the hardest part of the job is not the difficult and exacting work. It is combatting a formal approach to fulfilling plans, it is fighting for an attitude to work that befits the builders of the most advanced society in mankind's history. Those of his fellow-workers and administrative staff with whom Lagutin comes into sharp conflict are not rascals or laggards. They are workers with dignity and pride in their arduous labor, likeable people with an appealing lust for life. Lagutin is intolerant not of their characters (he is drawn to them) but of their backward habits to which they cling. And he is most uncompromising against those in higher positions who find excuses for them, for their carelessness, for their drinking. It is the new in an uncompromising struggle with the old.

There is a personal element which fires Lagutin's determination. His father lost his life in an accident in the plant caused by the negligence of a drunken fellow-worker. When an old-timer remonstrates with Lagutin for his harshness and appeals to him to be more humane, Lagutin replies bitterly that such "humanism" killed his father and, that it only serves to justify co-existence with loafing, drunkenness and poor labor discipline. We paid

too high a price for such humanism, he exclaims.

Lagutin demands honesty of all; he fights favoritism, he exposes negligence wherever and from whomever it comes, no matter what the level. Understandably, he is hardly popular with all. But even those who resent him, respect him for his sincerity, selflessness, efficiency and high moral standards. Lagutin is not out to win any popularity contests, to curry favor or to gain a reputation as a "good guy" at the price of condoning inefficiency, carelessness or a formal approach to fulfilling plans. In portraying Lagutin's principledness, his sparing use of words, his whole-hearted devotion to his work, the play is taking some well-aimed blows against windbags and gladhanders. The situation comes to a head when the team which Lagutin heads walks off the job for a bit of relaxation during the steel-making process. Enraged, Lagutin seeks them out and finds them at a drinking shack near the plant. The shack symbolizes the pernicious effects of heavy drinking on production as well as character. Though a veritable transformation has taken place in this respect (it was an extremely widespread curse among workers under tsarism) drunkenness still remains a serious problem. In a blind rage Lagutin jumps astride a bulldozer and rams it into the drinking shack, destroying it. Thus, he is guilty of not only taking matters into his own hands but of destroying 2,000 roubles' worth of socialist property, a very serious offense in the Soviet Union. For this he is removed from his position and brought up before a meeting of the entire plant.

And here is where the growing communist consciousness of the workers—the fruit of their own daily collective work and of the examples set by hundreds of thousands of Lagutins—makes itself felt. A fellow-worker and friend of Lagutin's doffs his hard hat and calls on the workers to raise 2,000 roubles for a "worthy cause". Nothing more is said. There is a dramatic silence. Then, one by one, the workers throw their roubles into the hard

hat—even those who make caustic comments, contribute.

The play has aroused widespread interest, especially among workers, and not only in the Soviet Union. When I visited Riesa, a steel town in the German Democratic Republic, and met with the representatives of the workers I realized that the impact of the play had gone beyond Soviet borders, and understandably so. First greeted by tens of thousands at the Moscow Art Theater, "Steelworkers" is now being viewed by millions on the screen under the title of "The Hottest Month", produced by the Mosfilm Studios. These millions hardly view it as mere entertainment. The play and the film have set off quite an intense and heated discussion. Lagutin himself has become the object of considerable debate. And it is hardly one-sided. Some criticize him for his high-handed action, others applaud him. But all, even his critics, recognize in Lagutin a bit of their own growing communist consciousness, while seeing some of their own weaknesses in those whom Lagutin fights. "Steelworkers" has been accorded the most meaningful tribute—it is being acclaimed by the Soviet steelworkers themselves. An audience of workers in Voroshilovgrad, a steel and mining center, greeted it with stormy applause when it was presented by the Moscow Art Theater. V. Korzukhin, a hero of socialist labor, warmly thanked Yefremov and the Art Theater for their genuine portrayal of steelworkers. In reply, Yefremov told the workers that it was just such close contact that made it possible for the Soviet stage to depict Soviet contemporary life.

Notwithstanding its overwhelming positive qualities, I feel that the play suffers from some serious shortcomings. Lagutin is portrayed a bit too much as a model of virtue, and at times his intense spirit of dedication borders on self-righteousness. A more human character would have not only been more effective on the stage but, I believe, in the steel plant as well. He would have been more likely

to win more affection as well as respect of the workers. But, that is for the plays to follow (quite a few on such themes are now appearing). The main thing is that plays like "The Man from Outside" and "Steelworkers" are raising vital questions and prodding hundreds of thousands into doing some deep thinking. They point the way for Soviet theater to grapple with contemporary problems especially in relation to the all-important struggle for a communist attitude to work. The two plays also provide a good illustration of the vast difference between the CONFLICTS dealt with by the Soviet and U.S. stages. Any worker in the U.S., fighting for greater productivity from his fellow-workers, would be justly regarded by them as a company stooge and treated accordingly. The audience would laugh such a "hero" off the stage. This is so because there is all the difference in the world between the "conflicts" in a socialist and a capitalist society. In a socialist society, it is around overcoming lingering habits and attitudes acquired under capitalist society when workers for their own self-preservation had to restrain their production efforts. The struggle to overcome these habits is already largely won in the Soviet Union, but it has to be raised to new heights in the advance toward communist society. In the U.S., in capitalist society, the conflict is expressed in a fight against speed-up, against ever-increasing exploitation, against unemployment, for the worker's securing a greater share of his product. It is a struggle which brings the worker into sharp collision with owners of the giant steel plants and with the government and society dominated by them. The differences in the character of the social conflicts inevitably must be reflected on the stages of the two societies, in any real works of art.

### **Moral Front**

Soviet theater is also sharply addressing itself to moral problems, to problems of relationships within the family, between generations and sexes in a socialist society.



"Maria", a popular play by Afanassy Salynsky, a prominent contemporary Soviet playwright, has been having a long and successful run at the Mayakovsky Theater. (A film based on the play was produced in 1973.) The theme is, indeed, a vital and timely one—the need to always keep in the forefront, the very purpose of communist construction—making life more beautiful for human beings. This is by no means an automatic process, since quite often some people tend to lose sight of the goal in the process of moving toward it. And at times these are people in authority, hence their errors can be and are often costly. "Maria" thus poses and deals with another conflict in the struggle for building communist society. It centers around the conflict between Maria, Communist Party secretary of a district Party Committee and the chief engineer of the hydroelectric power construction project in Siberia. (Pragmatism, though hardly comparable to the influence it exerts in our society, still affects some, especially technicians, in socialist society.) The chief engineer is a very pragmatic man. He is solely concerned with getting the job done efficiently, ahead of schedule and as economically as possible. To him, the JOB is constructing the dam and power station—period. To Maria, the job is achieving all the objectives the engineer is striving for. But she adds one important element, the decisive one, she stresses—the construction must be done in a way that takes into consideration the human needs of the people NOW. To her the NOW is the guarantee of the molding of *communist* man and woman of the FUTURE. The chief engineer bases his stand on Lenin's famous slogan: "Communism is Soviet power plus electrification of the entire country." But Maria counters by noting that in the slogan, "Soviet Power", people, comes first. Thus, throughout the play, Maria, who concerns herself with the smallest and most personal problems of the workers, comes in conflict with the engineer and his bureaucratic supporters who regard her as obstructing the

progress of construction. The conflict comes to a head when the question of destroying a 300-year village to build the dam comes up. (In the movie it is a marble mountain). Maria tries to stop the obliteration of the ancient village and almost loses her life in the process when she attempts to prevent the blast. The near-tragedy reveals not only the deep love for Maria on the part of all the workers, but hits home the profound lesson on what it means to construct communism that she had taught all, including the chief engineer.

## Rozov

Victor Rozov, one of the most gifted and prolific of Soviet dramatists, has considerably enriched the Soviet stage with plays dealing with many contemporary problems of morality and personal relationships. I attended rehearsals, at the Malaya Bronnaya Theater, of "Situation", one of Rozov's latest plays. As with Tovstonogov, the Sovremennik and the Taganka, this gave me an opportunity to observe Soviet actors more closely and to learn something of their relations with the director, Anatoly Efros in this particular case. Here, too, I was impressed by the democratic and comradely relationship, though the authority of the director never seemed to be questioned.

The play, a comedy, also dealt with a plant. Incidentally, our largely middle class theater-going audience would be bored stiff with such concentration on productive relations, but, I would hazard a guess, such dramatic fare would perhaps draw more workers to our theater. A good-natured, easy-going, technically advanced worker wins a 4,000-rouble prize for an invention. But being a socially conscious man, he realizes that his success was not just an individual achievement. He was helped by his team-

mates, management, many other workers. And so, he and a close friend and co-worker draw up a list of people to reward. But, it turns out, others also have their "lists" and their hands out. One, a supervisor, brazenly demands quite a sizable pay-off. The upshot is that the inventor is left very little for himself and his own family. The conflicts engendered by the question how to divide the money finally transform the award into a battle royal. And to add insult to injury, the inventor becomes the object of all kinds of malicious gossip. The chief problem faced by the inventor's practical wife and his strong-willed mother and close friend is the inventor's principled refusal to get involved in all this dirty in-fighting. An extremely good-hearted soul to whom being a "good human being is the most important thing in the world", he refuses to go against his character and philosophy of life. These are all petty struggles for him; above all, he wants to devote himself to create, to invent. Here Rozov, as in many of his plays, deals with a theme very close to his heart—the struggle against crass materialism and for communist morality. One must not lose one's humanity even in a justifiable struggle for what is right. This age-old moral problem still exists in a socialist society. However, it was the quite different character of the problem that struck me. At one point during the rehearsal I started to laugh to myself. Efros was curious as to what caused my merriment. "I was just trying to imagine the reaction of our audience to this play," I said. "And how would they react?" he asked. "They wouldn't believe it," I told him. By the standards of our society, Rozov would not have a play. Because no one in our country would ever allow a situation like this to develop. In the first place, an inventor, under our "free enterprise" system, would hardly be so generous and so concerned about doing right to his fellow-workers, and no one would expect him to be. The attitude would be: he did it and he deserves all the gain and glory. I don't know how far my point sunk

into Efros. To him and his staff of actors, who were Soviet people, the theme was a very real one. But notwithstanding the importance of the theme, this is not a good play and hardly on the level of most of Rozov's works. It smacks too much of a contrived plot and the characters are easily recognized as the creation of the author, particularly, the good-hearted "hero".

For me, Rozov's most moving play was not one on a supposedly contemporary Soviet theme or problem. However, to me and the enthusiastic audience, it had profound meaning for today. It was "Brother Alyosha" which, as I mentioned earlier, was based on Dostoyevsky's famous novel *The Karamazov Brothers*. Rozov's play is not only a dramatization of Dostoyevsky's novel; it is an extension, a development of the novel's main theme, an interpretation of it by a Soviet writer. For one thing, Rozov concentrates on one of the brothers, Alyosha, Dostoyevsky's and one of world literature's most beautiful characters. The play centers around Alyosha's relations with children and youth, his selfless involvement in the tragic lives of the humiliated and insulted of tsarist Russia, his one-man struggle for kindness and brotherhood. Rozov merges his own, confident Soviet humanism based on the solid foundation of the most human society in history, with the searching, yearning for brotherhood on the part of a great, lonely soul in a society where the good and the kind were the humiliated and insulted.

The Alyoshas are not a cry in the wilderness in contemporary Soviet society. They are legion. I met them everywhere in my wide travels and in living in the Soviet Union. They are the most devoted workers in factories and farms who not only do exemplary work themselves, but consider it natural to help their fellow-workers. They are the children I met at Young Pioneer Palaces and at Artek Young Pioneer Camp whose young hearts register every pain felt by the world's oppressed. They were my neighbors who, brought up for more than



half a century without exploitation, without racism and chauvinism, were not afraid to be good and kind to each other. But even under socialism it is not always easy to be good and kind. There are still plenty of "rugged individuals", the "legacy" of deeply engrained habits and attitudes of the past, who are ready to trample over others in their rush to get ahead.

To bring up an entire people in the spirit of goodness and kindness constitutes one of the main goals of Soviet literature, theater and all the vast forces for education and culture of socialist society. I frankly believe, much as is being done, there is room for considerable improvement on this score. This is generally recognized by Soviet writers, poets and dramatists. Rozov is particularly sensitive on this point. His "Brother Alyosha" sums up man's age-old struggle to be better in Alyosha's (Dostoyevsky's) speech at Ilyusha's grave. Alyosha tells Ilyusha's grief-stricken school boy-friends: "There is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory.... Some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education." Goodness, kindness, is the best educator, the best mold of people. Dostoyevsky could only express these beautiful thoughts in painful yearning. Rozov could repeat them to an audience which possessed all the means to make them beautiful realities. I watched the Soviet audience as it reacted to the play and, particularly, to Alyosha's moving appeal (and under Efros's extremely sensitive direction it is precisely that—an appeal). There was a stunned silence followed by an explosive ovation. They got the message, and that evening at Malaya Bronnaya, I am convinced, will live in them, as it will in me, as a "good memory". After the performance, I rushed backstage to express my profound appreciation to Efros. And I understood the reasons for Efros's deeply moving direction as I discussed Dostoyevsky and *The Karamazov Brothers* with him. Efros told me he was so moved by

the character of Alyosha he wept during rehearsals as he listened to his "appeal".

Here, let me note that few writers are as much part of the Soviet theatrical and cinema scene as Dostoyevsky. This was particularly demonstrated in the extensive celebration, in 1971, of the 150th anniversary of the great Russian writer's birth. It was a tribute to Dostoyevsky by the formerly "humiliated and insulted" who had inherited their earth. No one would perhaps appreciate this poetic justice more than Dostoyevsky himself. Soviet television, screen and stage have made Dostoyevsky's beautiful Christ-like characters—Alyosha, Prince Myshkin, Sonya—known to tens of millions. The Soviet attitude to Dostoyevsky, perhaps, is best summed up by the remarks made at the celebration in the Bolshoi Theater by Konstantin Fedin, one of the pioneers of Soviet literature. Dostoyevsky, Fedin noted, responded with his whole heart and conscience to the complex and painful problems of the tragic times when money, violence and cynicism made people instruments of a heartless and senseless pursuit of selfish interests. Fedin stressed that Dostoyevsky's works were charged with the conviction that man's soul was in rebellion against such a way of life, was desperately seeking a way out and would rather choose death than be transformed into a thing for sale. Dostoyevsky's confusion, his wanderings and suffering, reflected frustration arising from the inability to solve the complex problems, alone, Fedin pointed out. He stressed that while the Soviet people well understood Dostoyevsky's anxieties and high moral demands, they did not share his confusion. The Revolution we won half a century ago, gave us firm confidence in the future and a reasonable and fair social system, Fedin declared, and thus, we do not share Dostoyevsky's tragic loneliness, the loneliness of an artist facing the unknown. "We have done away with the world of the humiliated and insulted." The point stressed by Fedin that Soviet people do not share Dostoyevsky's "loneliness",

also helps explain why, although he is extremely popular with the mass of Soviet people, I came across a surprising number of Soviet citizens who did not warm up to the great writer. They found it hard to identify themselves with his tragic world, they told me. I could understand their reactions but, frankly, I can hardly accept that as a reason for failing to embrace his humanism which Soviet theater, cinema and publishers are making available to a mass audience never dreamed of by Dostoyevsky. I felt it was like denying themselves the sun. I believe it will not be too long before they, too, reach out for its warmth.

### Vampilov

One of the most interesting and probing of contemporary Soviet playwrights is Alexander Vampilov. The Soviet stage lost one of its most talented and most promising dramatists when Vampilov met his tragic end in the icy waters of Lake Baikal in 1972 at the age of 35. The playwright drowned when his boat capsized. A native of Irkutsk (he worked for a time on the staff of an Irkutsk newspaper), Siberia, its towns and rural areas serve as the locale of his plays. But the characters and the themes have universal appeal, as his growing popularity reveals. Perhaps this can best be explained by dealing with some of his most popular plays. I saw and read a number of Vampilov's works and found myself steadily drawn closer to him. I thought his plays (excellently performed by the Sovremennik Theater) most appealing, particularly his "20 Minutes With an Angel". In this short, but extremely hard-hitting play, Vampilov packs a powerful mixture of sharply pointed humor and deep pathos. You are caught up in a whirlwind of laughter only to suddenly find yourself gripped by a sobering sadness that hovered over the merriment all the time. The play starts off quite

simply—deceptively so. Two men are winding up a weekend drunk in a third-rate provincial hotel room. Vodka bottles are sprawled over the floor, but their thirst is hardly quenched. And so they start a desperate search for a benefactor whom they can hit for another bottle (they are stone-broke). They first make phone calls to bare acquaintances (they are new to the town) and are, of course, curtly turned down. They even try to get some cash out of the cleaning woman but she is obviously experienced with such guests. Then, partly in fun and more in desperation, Anchugin, the drunker one (splendidly portrayed by Oleg Tabakov), opens the window and appeals to "anyone who can help out a person in great need". The appeal is quite an extravagant one—for 100 roubles. Khomutov, his buddy who is a bit more sober, tries to restrain Anchugin. And so the two sit morosely on their beds and try to dig up some change for an S.O.S. telegram home.

Suddenly, there is a knock on the door. A young man (with a truly angelic face) asks if anyone from the room had just shouted out to the street. Anchugin warily and somewhat belligerently replies in the affirmative. "And did you say you badly needed 100 roubles?" the young man asks. Anchugin's caginess mounts. "Yes, I did, so what?" he retorts. "Well, here is the 100 roubles," the young man answers and, taking out a stack of rouble notes, he hands them to Anchugin. Anchugin first regards this as a joke at his expense and responds in a surly fashion. Then when it is clear that the young man is dead serious, he becomes suspicious. Why should anyone want to give him 100 roubles? "You asked for it and I have it. But you need it more than I," the young man says simply. However, it is his very simplicity and honesty that heightened the suspicion of the two men. And their suspicion takes on an increasingly aggressive form. They are torn—to refuse the money when they are so desperate for three roubles and 65 kopeks (the price of a bottle of vodka) is



just too much. At the same time, they suspect trouble ahead. "Where did you get the money?" they ask belligerently. "It's mine. I earned it," the young man replies and he informs them that he is an agronomist. But the two are convinced he stole the money and wants to involve them in his shady affair. They can't find the answer to "why" he would want to do this. And their inability to explain the situation only torments and incites them.

Finally, they lay hands on the young man (he does not resist too strongly) and tie him down to a chair. They search his papers and discover he is truly an agronomist, but that in no way allays their suspicion. By this time they have worked themselves up into righteous fury, and they decide to give their "victim" a sort of spontaneous comrades' court trial. So they call in the hotel neighbors: a beat-up hack musician, the cleaning woman and a young couple. All, except the young wife, take the same attitude toward the "angel" as the two drunks. In fact, the young woman's husband takes over the "prosecution", a role which he seems to have long awaited and which he obviously relishes. The young woman persists in her lone defense of the "angel". "Why can't you believe that someone can simply want TO DO GOOD?" she asks. But all brush aside her question as unworthy of comment.

In the course of disputing her faith in the goodness of people they reveal the cynicism which has warped their outlook. The most adamant against her position is her self-righteous husband. For the first time the young couple realize how little they actually have in common. The pressure against the "angel" finally breaks him down, and he explains why he wanted to give them the 100 roubles. He tells them that he had just returned to his hometown, after an absence of some years, to see his mother. During his long absence he had seldom written to her and had never bothered to find out if she needed any help. Finally, disturbed by his conscience, he gathered together 100 roubles and had come to present it to her. But he had

come too late. His mother had passed away just as he arrived. The 100 roubles became a symbol of his guilt and he felt an irresistible need to get rid of it—to give it to someone who urgently needed the money. And so the drunken appeal was just what he had been waiting for.

As the "angel" tells his story the "court" is transformed. The deeply-rooted influences of their everyday human way of life break through their cynical shell. A profound sense of shame overcomes them. And the simple faith of the young woman now haunts them: Why didn't they, too, believe in the goodness of people? The musician shamefacedly tries to explain for all of them. "Don't be too hard on us. We have somehow forgotten our faith in one another," he pleads with the "angel". The two drunks are sobered up by this experience and they, too, remember what they had forgotten. Only the "principled" husband learns nothing from his experience. What bothers him is that the "angel" exposed the emptiness of their marriage. And as he looks at his weeping wife he realizes that an unbridgeable gap now separates them. The play closes with Anchugin leading them all in the singing of a soulful Russian folk song.

The play had a powerful impact on the audience. It was demonstrated more by the thoughtful expressions on their faces than in their prolonged and stormy applause. ALL HAD BEEN AWAKENED TO RECALLING WHAT HAD BEEN FORGOTTEN. A deep truth, that was part of their life but not fully understood and appreciated, was illuminated by Vampilov's and the Sovremenik's profound artistry. For many of our "sophisticated" theater-goers Vampilov's play would be perhaps regarded as "corny" and "sentimental mush". They would not believe it and would just laugh at the "angel's" story about "Mother". But I believe we could well do with a lot less of our "sophistication" and with a bit of the "innocence" of Soviet audiences. And I am convinced

most Americans would be deeply moved by Vampilov's "innocence". Vampilov's play can be taken at two levels. First, as it pertains to Soviet life. What was he trying to say? What was it that so profoundly moved this Moscow theater-wise audience? I believe Vampilov was making the point that even in socialist society—the most human that has ever existed in the history of man—the centuries-bred feelings and attitudes of mutual distrust still affect the personal, if not the collective, relations of people. Soviet people live the most collective life of any people in the world. In their working and social relations they have gone a long way toward making collectivity a normal part of their daily life. It is in personal relations that the most difficult and most complex job has yet to be done. And the objective base for much of the difficulties lies in that under socialism there are still inequalities, not only in income, but in cultural, ethical and moral levels of development. They are a far cry from the yawning gaps that divide people in our society, but for socialist man and woman moving toward communist society these are still gaps that need to be bridged.

Vampilov, it seems to me, was also trying to say: see, even in our advanced society, simple goodness is still under suspicion, we are not yet ready to receive our "angels", we do not yet trust one another enough for that. Thus, Vampilov's play is universal in its message and appeal even though it is addressed to a Soviet audience. For what is universal in man's eternal struggle to better himself and the world he lives in, in the final analysis, lies in the struggle not only for his "angels". It is to achieve these qualities on a truly mass level. And in respect to man's progress toward this, his most noble goal, there is no comparison between the two societies. In our, capitalist society, Vampilov's "angel" would be jeered at and regarded as a "sucker".

But to get back to the first point—the message for the Soviet people. The heritage of self-seeking, much as it

has already been circumscribed by half century of socialist life, still hinders the full development of socialist personal relations. Of course, this is linked with objective processes of social development, especially as regards economic life—raising the material and cultural level. This is the essence of the direction charted by the 24th Congress of the CPSU. Personal relations are, after all, the reflections of the level of the social development of a society. And the years of sacrifice and scarcities that was the lot of this pioneer land of socialism forged the most advanced people in the world today. But it also had its negative effects. Scarcities also contributed toward self-seeking, careerism and philistinism. Marxists, unlike pseudo-"pure" revolutionaries, never made a virtue out of scarcity or regarded communism as the "equal" sharing of poverty. They long recognized that the creation of abundance on a mass scale is the foundation on which truly equal and human relations can be built. Vampilov's play (and in one form or another this is the direction of all of his plays with which I am familiar) constitutes a powerful weapon in the struggle to uproot weeds that still grow in the good socialist earth. This is also demonstrated in Vampilov's full-length play "Last Summer in Chulimsk". I read the play in Russian before seeing it performed at Moscow's Yermolova Theater. My interest in Vampilov grew with my reading and, thus, I am acquainted with far more of his works in books than on the stage. For this I have to thank Irina Silina, the lovely Komsomol Secretary at the Moscow State Theater Library, who called these works to my attention and loaned me the books.

It was a good thing I read "Last Summer in Chulimsk", because, I'm sorry to report, one could not get the full power and beauty from the Yermolova Theater's production. Vampilov's play, here as elsewhere, is a lyrical voice that calls for very sensitive acting and direction. The play has some of the deceptively low-key qualities of Che-



khov's works which appear to be "commonplace", but played with the sensitive artistry, reveal the depth and poetry in "little things". Unfortunately, the Yermolova Theater's production failed to disclose these Chekhovian qualities of the play. Thus, I had to rely more on the image I had formed in my reading of the play. Vampilov's play deals with the search for PERSONAL happiness and love. This is the theme of a number of Soviet contemporary plays I saw. These are not easy goals to achieve even in such a human society as advanced socialism. The conflicts between the sexes in the struggle for love exist in an entirely different setting under socialism, something, I discovered, is not quite appreciated by many Soviet people who are only familiar with their own way of life. But the conflicts not only exist under socialism; they are still affected by many backward outlooks and customs.

The action of the play takes place in and around a village lunchroom (chainaya) in a resort area in Siberia. It centers around Valentina, an 18-year-old waitress who works in the lunchroom across the street from her home. Valentina radiates confidence in people, in their innate goodness, in their ability to overcome negative qualities. This confidence and love is expressed in "little things", above all, in Valentina's ceaseless care for the small neglected and abused garden leading to the lunchroom. The garden is not only disregarded, it is trampled upon. It serves as the "short cut" to the lunchroom, and the fence surrounding it is daily broken down by the lunchroom customers. Valentina, alone, protects and repairs the garden. Patiently, without a word against those who trample on it, she restores the garden and mends the broken fence. She does this not as a martyr bearing her cross, but out of joy in seeing the garden come to life again. For her, beauty is its own reward. It is in the process of such care for the garden that Shamanov, a disillusioned and somewhat cynical man of 32, takes

notice of Valentina. Shamanov had been frequenting the lunchroom for almost one year and had been almost entirely unaware of Valentina's existence. Now, suddenly, he found himself not only observing her, but also curious about her attentiveness to the garden. "Why do you bother? You're doing useless labor. The fence you are mending will only be trampled upon again," he tells her. Without interrupting her work, Valentina replies simply: "Then I'll mend it again. Gradually, people will stop trampling on it. They will learn to respect the garden and will walk around it on the sidewalk." "Who?" Shamanov asks sceptically. "Well, you, for one, walk around it," Valentina reminds him.

In Valentina's simple but profound reply to Shamanov's cynicism Vampilov answers all the sceptics who point to the examples of indifference to the common welfare that still exists under socialism. For in Valentina's words, more in her actions, is expressed the essence of the process of molding socialist (and communist) man and woman—**THE FORCE OF DAILY EXAMPLE IS DAILY CHANGING THE HABITS**, thinking and relations of people. You see it in so many "little things": the spotless Moscow Metro, the passing on of coins for fare by riders in the buses, the natural way that the steam room of the banya (public bath house) is collectively cleaned and serviced by its patrons. Tell a Soviet citizen that he or she is in "process of change" and they'll look at you blankly. But they live this process of progressive transformation naturally and, on the whole, **UNCONSCIOUSLY**. It is the function of playwrights like Vampilov to not only make this an increasingly conscious process, but to accelerate it. But to return to the play. . . .

Valentina (though Shamanov has been unaware of it) has been in love with him for some time. Shamanov was too preoccupied with self-pity to take notice of her or what was going on around him. Even his affair with Kash-

kina, a woman of his age who lived in a room above the lunchroom, was devoid of any real feelings. Valentina awakens him to life and shakes him out of his deadening torpor. He falls in love with her (though he fights against his feelings because of the rather big difference in their life experience).

Valentina is also loved by Pashka, a young tough. Pashka is attracted to Valentina for reasons similar to Shamanov's—he, too, is drawn to her simple goodness that is the real source of her beauty. But Pashka is crude and aggressive and tries to force his love on her. Pashka is the illegitimate son of Khoroshikh, a hard-working, good-hearted woman in charge of the lunchroom. Pashka's resentment and aggressiveness is in part explained by his feeling that he is unwanted and in the way. Dergachev, Khoroshikh's husband, was at the front (he lost a leg) and was taken prisoner during the war. And as was the case with many in those terrible years, Khoroshikh thought him dead. She bore a child (Pashka) to another man and Dergachev never forgave her or Pashka for that.

The conflict between Pashka and Shamanov is sharpened. The situation is aggravated by Kashkina who tries to hold on to Shamanov even though he is quite open with her about his feelings toward her. Kashkina intercepts a note from Shamanov arranging a date with Valentina (which she never gets). In an effort to get Valentina out of the way, Kashkina eggs on Mechetkin, a middle-aged, pompous and platitudinous bureaucrat, to woo Valentina. The situation comes to a head when Valentina, after being lectured by her father on Mechetkin's virtues (among the virtues cited is Mechetkin's money—"Money is also getting into style," her father tells Valentina), goes out with Pashka. This is an act of defiance of her father, but it is also prompted by her pity for Pashka. Valentina had witnessed a scene where Pashka was humiliated by his mother in an outburst of desperation and rage.

Pashka, desperately trying to get Valentina, seduces her. "Now she's mine," he tells his mother jubilantly and boastfully. "You fool," his mother replies, "now she'll hate you."

Shamanov, who was searching for Valentina, appears. He notices the distraught condition she's in and guesses the reason for it. But Pashka doesn't let him guess for long. He boastfully tells Shamanov: "You're too late. She's mine now." Shamanov disregards him (on our stage, he would have probably smashed Pashka's jaw) and consoles Valentina. He tells her that he loves her and that nothing will in any way affect his feelings for her.... Valentina sobs uncontrollably and then recovers her composure.

Her father, known for his uncontrollable temper, appears on the scene. He had been searching frantically for Valentina. He demands to know who was with her that night. Both Pashka and Shamanov claim they were with her. But Valentina tells her father it was neither of them. "I was with Mechetkin," she lies. And she turns furiously on both Pashka and Shamanov telling them she wants nothing to do with either of them.

In the final scene, Shamanov, speaking over the phone to his superiors, tells them he's waiting for a car to take him back to town. He has gotten over his "disillusionment" and wants to get back to work. It's a bright morning and all are gathered around the lunchroom. Valentina appears. She walks to the garden and starts to mend the fence again. All watch her and this time with deeper understanding and respect. Finally, an old man, a member of a Siberian national minority group akin to our Eskimos, comes over and joins her in mending the fence.

The play honestly reveals the backward habits and outlooks that still make their influence felt in the rural areas. These also affect (though in a different form and degree) workers and intelligentsia. But Vampilov's is far from a pessimistic play. On the contrary, it is Valentina,



young, sweet, innocent and trusting and determined to make life and people better, who emerges as the strongest character. And all, including those who abused her, can't help being influenced by her example.

The play has weaknesses—the weaknesses I found in other contemporary Soviet plays. The characters are not quite fully drawn, not deeply enough probed. Why Valentina is the way she is, is not explained on the stage. You have to know it by knowing Soviet society which produces countless Valentinas. (And perhaps for a Soviet audience, what was shown of Valentina was enough because of this.) Then, too, why Shamanov is cynical and disillusioned is largely explained by Kashkina. And she gets her information from a former girl friend of Shamanov, whom he barely remembers. These are flaws. But they are more than made up for. Vampilov's play rings with profound love for what is beautiful and genuine in people and confidence that it is these qualities that are being engendered by Soviet society. Vampilov's confidence is all the stronger because it is based on truth and on the Valentinas—and they are legion in the Soviet Union today.

### Alexander Volodin

The noted U.S. playwright, Jerome Lawrence (who together with his team-mate, Robert Lee, made an extensive study in 1971 of Soviet theater) urged that "some of the plays by such leading dramatists as Arbuzov, Volodin and Rozov should be seen in the U.S.". I would only add that the list could also include many of the playwrights I dealt with and I would put particular stress on Rozov, Volodin and Vampilov. I found Alexander Volodin (a Leningrader) to be one of the most popular and most highly regarded of contemporary Soviet playwrights. His plays have been running for years in Moscow's Sovre-

mennik and Art theaters, as well as in the Leningrad Bolshoi Dramatic Theater, and it is still very difficult to get a ticket to see them. I believe Volodin's great popularity is well justified. His is one of the sharpest and at the same time one of the most sensitive pens enlisted in the struggle against all that stands in the way of Soviet society's progress. Volodin, like Vampilov, has that rare quality—the ability to skillfully combine satire and even farcical humor with the poetic tenderness. This can be best illustrated by dealing with two of his most popular plays, "The Appointment" (in respect to a high position) and "Don't Part With Your Beloved".

"The Appointment" is an extremely witty hard-hitting satirical (and farcical) play whose target is phony "leaders" who know how to exploit the brains of others. Phoni-ness is, perhaps, one of the most difficult of the negative characteristics (that still cling to people under socialism) to combat, because those who practice it are usually very adept at covering it up. They also know how to take advantage of sincere and trusting souls.

I saw the play excellently performed at the Sovremennik. It is directed by Oleg Yefremov, who also plays Lyamin, the leading role. Yefremov, incidentally, though he is quite occupied, fulfilling his post as director of the Moscow Art Theater (also playing many roles in his theater and on the screen), nevertheless finds time to perform the role of Lyamin at the Sovremennik. Lyamin is a simple, honest guy, who finds himself promoted to the director's chair. He is replacing Kuropeyev, the phony, played by Yevgeny Yevstigneyev, a splendid actor, formerly with the Sovremennik and now with the Moscow Art Theater. Kuropeyev, who evidently went higher up, has a good "nose", as he puts it, and knows where the winds blow. He is a jolly, even likable, blow-hard, who picks Lyamin's brains. Lyamin is a soft touch for this "artist" of emotion. He melts when Kuropeyev embraces him and declares "I love you". Kuropeyev

assumes that his affection for someone gives him license to place all sorts of demands on him. This includes getting Lyamin to write his articles for the press, which are published under Kuropeyev's by-line. Lyamin is no executive type—he would be much happier working at his speciality or carving statues (his hobby). Thus, he is an easy mark for his staff who pile all sorts of personal demands on him.

One of the questions the play seems to suggest is: where is the line drawn between personal problems and personal responsibility. This hardly poses a problem for executives in our big business firms who know they have to meet only ONE RESPONSIBILITY—SECURING THE MAXIMUM PROFITS FOR THE CORPORATION. But it is quite another thing in a society where the aim of more production is making a happier life for people. Here, the relationship between the specific problems (including their personal ones) faced by workers, who are engaged in production in a particular plant, and the overall production needs and demands of society as a whole, is not easily harmonised. The balance between the two is far more complex and more difficult to achieve because socialism as the most humane society can't disregard EITHER needs or demands. I've seen this particularly demonstrated in the case of women workers with problems of health or concerning their children. No private corporation in our country would make the kind of allowances in respect to time off (with pay) that I have seen made in the Soviet Union as a normal procedure. At times, it is true, this consideration is abused by some with the consequent economic loss. And there is a struggle against such dishonest practices. But the benefit of the doubt (from what I observed) is usually given to the worker.

To get back to the play. As an executive, who is a product of such socialist standards, Lyamin can't but approach the personal problems of the workers as his own. Here the question arises: how do you prevent some

from exploiting the humanism of socialist society? How does socialist society produce the ideal combination, the harmonizing of attention to personal problems and the carrying out of personal responsibilities? I imagine the resolution of this problem will provide a great deal of material for many plays, films and novels (as it has already done). If only from the standpoint of acquainting American people (especially workers) with the standard and morals governing production relations in socialist society as well as its problems in this respect, such plays as Volodin's and many others I described, would be of great value. It would give Americans a realistic peek into the OTHER AND MORE HUMAN WORLD.

Volodin's play also directs its barbs against petty, carping family relations that take the joy out of life and make family life an ordeal. It is in family relations (the most intimate relations and least directly connected with the progressive influences of collective life) that the backward habits and attitudes of the past cling most tenaciously. Volodin reduces to its farcical essence the agonizing squabbles that constitute the relations between Lyamin's father (played with just the right touch by that versatile actor, Igor Kvasha) and mother (hilariously portrayed by Galina Volchek, Sovremennik's very capable director). The father is a pensioned musician who never quite made the grade (for which the mother has never forgiven him). She constantly reminds him, "you had a good memory, but a terrible ear". The father pays back his nagging spouse in kind. So Lyamin never has a moment's peace or pleasure in his home. "Look what you have reduced our family life to, a life without joy, a life of endless quarrels over petty things," he tells his parents. But they don't know what he is talking about. The play also deals with Lyamin's relations with Nyuta, his secretary (played by Nina Doroshina with the proper combination of lightness and sadness to depict a sincere lovely Soviet woman who, as a result of bitter expe-



riences, doesn't quite trust men). Nyuta loves Lyamin for his simple goodness and honesty. They start with an affair and end up in marriage. Nyuta, however, has doubts that Lyamin will ever fully accept her because of her past. But Lyamin is not at all concerned about what was—he loves her for what she is. So, here you have the situation: an honest Lyamin, who is concerned about the personal problems of his fellow-workers but at the same time wants to do an efficient job as an executive. His easy-going ways don't work, so he tries to swing to the other extreme. But that doesn't work either, that's not his cup of tea. And he doesn't seem to be able to find the proper combination. He decides the job of executive is not for him and wants to resign. But in comes his replacement named Muraveyev (also played by Yevstigneyev). Muraveyev is the spitting image of Kuropeyev (the slight change in name is used by Volodin to emphasize the similarity). Lyamin realizes that his would-be-replacement is a throw back to the bureaucrat and phony he replaced and so does not resign.

The play concludes with the return visit of Kuropeyev who has come to ask Lyamin to write another article for him. But Lyamin, by this time, has wisened up. He tells Kuropeyev: "You are a capable man but you are not fit to direct others. You would make a good director of a cinema theater. Why don't you take a job you are fit for—everyone would be happier." But Kuropeyev looks at Lyamin incredulously.

I felt the end was a bit abrupt and somewhat unfinished. I also felt that the theme, while lending itself to the kind of farcical treatment that Volodin employs so effectively, needs to be more deeply probed. But that's for another play. At the level on which Volodin treats the problem, "The Appointment" is an effective piece of work (and, not least of all, highly entertaining) that reveals a biting pen and a piercing eye.

"Don't Part With Your Beloved" is a dramatization

of one of Volodin's most popular short stories. I saw an extremely moving production of it in Moscow by the Leningrad Komsomol Theater when it was on tour in the Soviet capital. The Leningrad theater was paid the highest tribute—it received an ovation not only from the extremely exacting audience, but from its Moscow colleagues. And justly so. The play was a lyrical poem to youth, a wise and tender comment on the tragedy of young love that can't find its way through the thorny path of life. Its theme, of course, is universal. But Volodin deals with the tragedy as it takes place in Soviet society. His young lovers are not idealized people but young people in the process of social transition. Thus, while his youth have much in common with all youth, they suffer and struggle with the age-old problem of love in their own way. Like all young lovers who have not learned to treasure this, life's most precious gift, they cast it away like a stone, instead of clutching it tightly for the priceless jewel that it is. However, already there is a deeper awakening in the process of development, a greater sensitivity toward each other even as they unconsciously deal each other cruel blows OUT OF LOVE. There is also the voice of socialist society in the person of the woman divorce judge (most people's judges in the Soviet Union are women) commenting on the tragedy of lightly parting with one's beloved. She is actually the inner voice of the unhappy young couples.

It would all sound quite corny and false in the hands of our playwrights and on our stage in today's troublous times. For one thing, most of our divorce judges are hardly in a position to lecture or give advice. Then, the advice would sound hollow, because it is, above all, our decaying society that contributes to the break-up of marriages. In fact, it would be difficult, indeed, to write or stage such a tender love story in the U.S. of Watergate, Attica, and political assassinations. The material is just not at hand at present. And, yet, underneath all the

turmoil, how much yearning there is for such tenderness! But on the Soviet stage, Volodin's play not only doesn't sound corny—it doesn't strike one false note. No one would be more likely to react against either than the largely youth audience who sat spellbound as the play told their story. And it is not because there is no serious divorce problem in the Soviet Union. There is. While I don't believe Soviet divorce rate has yet reached ours, it is nevertheless quite high. Personal relations, especially marriage relations, are exceedingly complex and linked to many factors. And as Volodin's play reveals, the process of maturing is a personal matter, notwithstanding the fact that a socialist society has eliminated or considerably minimized many factors operating to break up families in our "free enterprise" society, not least of all financial, racial, national and social pressures. Soviet young couples do face difficulties arising from the serious housing situation which the country inherited and which was complicated by the tremendous destruction caused by the nazi invasion. It is still hard for a young couple to get their own apartment. But with the vast housing construction (unprecedented in history) this situation is being steadily improved and, as serious as it still is, Soviet young people know that it is only a matter of time before it is resolved. On the other hand, they do not confront the much more severe problems (which not only are not being resolved in our country but are being aggravated) such as sky-rocketing rents, runaway inflation, unemployment, overall insecurity, the high cost of child birth, care and nurseries.

Thus, Volodin's unfortunate young couples face the complex problems in a society which not only does not produce the kind of pressures on family relations that ours does but which creates conditions that tend to produce more stability in such relations. But, as Volodin's play shows and Soviet life itself demonstrates, society CANNOT resolve personal problems for its citi-

zens, least of all the problems linked with marriage and, especially, for the young.

They play deals with a number of marriage break-ups, but it centers around a young couple, Mitya and Katya, both workers of average education and cultural development (quite a good deal higher than our AVERAGE). Their marriage flounders—on "little things" that are linked with hangovers from past attitudes toward relations of the sexes. Mitya's male "pride" is hurt because (unjustly) he suspects her of being unfaithful to him. Katya, understandably, resents his lack of confidence in her and refuses to deny his unjust accusation. Both stubbornly cling to their positions. Katya elevates her refusal to openly discuss the situation to a principle, and Mitya replies in kind. Thus, though they love each other deeply, they are not mature enough to place their love above their pride. They torment each other mercilessly and beat their love to the ground.

Both try to drown their love in new loves but they end up only hurting their new partners and themselves. Mitya gets into a fight with a friend—the one he suspected of having an affair with Katya. He threatens the friend with a knife but never uses it. However, the rumour (spread by his opponent) gets around that Mitya is going to prison. Katya feels she's at fault and her accumulated sense of guilt finally leads to her collapse. She is hospitalized in a mental institution. And here is where the finest qualities in both emerge, here is where their love rises up from its ashes and flames up anew. All the sham goes up in smoke. Mitya's love is now more understanding, more tender and, above all, more SELFLESS. He will now never leave her. All his efforts are now directed toward one goal—speeding her recovery. And Katya feels and responds to that selfless love.

What emerges triumphant in all this tragedy is the new human being molded by Soviet society—one who still is capable of blindly hurting those he loves, but with



an expanding capacity for selfless love. It is a quality that was forged in the fires of the tremendous sacrifices and struggles that is so much not only a part of Soviet history but of the character of the Soviet people. It is a quality nourished by more than half a century of collective living.

The Leningrad Komsomol Theater (largely made up of young actors) LIVED the play, particularly L. Malevannya, who portrayed Katya. Much credit is also due to the imaginative direction of G. Oporkov. Oporkov's is a gentle touch, as tender as a sweet kiss. The simple imaginative setting creates and conveys the dream-like lyrical mood. The stage is framed by the shadowy silhouettes of trees, etched by dim street lights. There is an elevator and a telephone booth on one end and a bench on the other. Two trumpet players provide the music sequences—sad, plaintive and bitter-sweet sounds that are cut off and come on like stresses and accents on syllables. The action is fluid and expertly interwoven. The threads of a number of "case histories" are linked with the central characters, Mitya and Katya.

The two plays, "The Appointment" and "Don't Part With Your Beloved", reveal Volodin as an extremely able playwright who can be savagely satirical and extremely tender. And what is particularly important, both necessary and powerful qualities are being ably employed to point up and deal with problems which have to be resolved in order to mold communist man and woman.

### Mikhail Roshchin

Another talented young playwright who has his ear close to the contemporary Soviet ground is Mikhail Roshchin. I already dealt with his "Valentin and Valentina". Roshchin's "The Old New Year" (it refers to the

old Russian calendar New Year which is still widely celebrated in the Soviet Union) also merits serious attention. It is well staged and performed at the Moscow Art Theater under Yefremov's able direction. During our pleasant informal discussion, Yefremov, in response to my question, "how do you see the Moscow Art carrying on its great traditions in respect to Soviet life today?", pointed to "Steelworkers" and added: "See 'The Old New Year'". Yefremov had high praise for Roshchin, whom he regards as one of the most promising of the young Soviet playwrights. I believe Yefremov had a point. The audience paid the highest tribute to "The Old New Year"—they LIVED it. From the minute the curtain rose to the final words and gestures of the actors, the Moscow Art Theater branch on Moskvina Street rocked with laughter. The play would have had quite an impressive score by our audience reaction count. Roshchin's play, like "Steelworkers", "Ascent to Mount Fuji", "The Man from Outside", "Maria" and others I mentioned earlier, is an important part of Soviet theater's struggle against the repulsive and harmful social attitudes and concepts that still cling to people under socialism. "The Old New Year", however, is distinguished from the others in that it deals with these characteristics SATIRICALLY. It punctured sham, egoism, philistinism, dilletantism and pseudo-philosophic concepts. It reminded me of Mayakovsky's "Bath-House" (splendidly performed by the Theater of Satire) applied to the current Soviet scene.

There is a Comedia del Arté spirit about the play—and the weapons of buffoonery and farce are directed against these negative traits. They are far more devastating than the lecture-room. Each scene is introduced by an acid comment by a voice off stage. The play focuses (and in the Act II it does this simultaneously) on two families. One of the working class and the other of the intelligentsia. Thus, it is in a position to take on these negative features in both segments of Soviet society. To demon-

strate that they actually complement each other, the leading characters, the husbands and the wives, are both given the same first names—Pyotr for the men and Klava for the women. The working class Pyotr and Klava bear the revealing surname, Sebeikin (one who is out for himself). The intelligentsia couple are called Poluorlov (half an eagle). That about characterizes them. The main targets are the male members of the family. Pyotr Sebeikin is a likable, open-hearted (in the true Russian spirit) and easy-going fellow. He is also quite smug, self-satisfied and contemptuous of responsibility and collectivity, and regards with disdain those who strive to raise their cultural and technical levels. He is dazzled by his ability to perform such an ordinary household chore as fixing an electric bulb socket and expects fulsome praise from his wife and all members of the household for this "feat". At the slightest criticism from his wife, Pyotr almost breaks down in tears and cautiously demands his coat (he is not quite so ready to leave). The most important thing in life, he says, summing up his philosophy, is to enjoy the good things of life. "What do I want responsibility for? I could be a team leader if I desired but then think of the headaches I would have. How could I enjoy life if I went to evening school and tried to improve myself?"

Sebeikin's slothful attitude reflects the lingering influences of Oblomovism (that paralyzing indolence that permeated tsarist society), which half a century of socialism and successive five-year plans dumped into the ash can of history. Roshchin also ridicules the preoccupation with material things which is far from the all-pervading attitude comfortable bourgeois critics and purist Leftists in the U.S. make it out to be. In the Soviet Union, it does, however, constitute an influence that has to be increasingly combatted as material conditions improve. Sebeikin spends much of his time gushing over his television set, and when the movers who bring his

piano ask if he hasn't ordered a second one, he is ready to take it.

The intellectual Pyotr, egged on by his adoring wife and adulating friends (one a celebrated singer and the other an "old-time cultural worker"), is a "rebel" against authority, modern living and civilization in general. Heaving deep sighs in the manner of the old Russian intellectual, he yearns for "freedom". "Freedom" actually boils down to recognition of his "genius", as his friend the singer characterizes him. He also cries out for a return to nature (as he ravenously devours a hazel nut with considerable moaning, because following the all-night party there was nothing left in the house to eat).

Pyotr Poluorlov demonstrates his "freedom" by ripping out the telephone wire in his home when his chief calls him (Pyotr was on a sulking binge because one of his engineering projects was turned down). He shows his contempt for modern life by getting rid of his furniture (and then cries like a child for his favourite desk lamp). Roshchin has a field-day puncturing pseudo-intellectual pretenses and dilletantism that still affect sections of the Soviet intelligentsia.

The show-down in each family is reached in incidents involving their offspring. Pyotr Sebeikin's little girl is a spoiled brat whose vocabulary is largely limited to one word: MINE. This largely expresses Pyotr's own philosophy, but when it keeps hitting him in the face, he rebels against its repulsiveness and threatens to spank the child. With all his talk about "just look out for your own self", Pyotr is still a citizen of Soviet society where collectivity is a way of life and "mine" has been replaced to a large extent by "ours". But Pyotr is up against the wrath of his wife and her father and mother, and my guess is that he would have a hard time of it with most Soviet citizens who regard striking a child as a leftover of the barbaric past. When he is threatened with the militia he storms out of the house but carefully leaves his bridges intact. "I'm



leaving the house," he shouts. And adds: "for three days."

Pyotr Poluorlov faces his crisis on a more "advanced" level. His 11-year-old son, in the spirit of freedom, drinks a bottle of wine, gets half crocked and proceeds to dump his school books down the incinerator. When his astonished and exasperated father remonstrates with him, the boy throws back at Pyotr his own high-sounding platitudes about freedom. This Pyotr also leaves home. "For a long while," he announces with cautious vagueness. The crisis in both households takes place in an atmosphere of spiritual hangover that follows the celebration of the Old New Year and the declarations of personal freedom and self-concern. Both Pyotrs are eaten up by their feeling of emptiness and purposelessness. But Roshchin never stops to moralize, harangue or lecture. The process of disenchantment with their "freedoms" is depicted, if anything, with even greater hilarity. Nothing dissolves phoniness like ridicule and nothing teaches like a good hearty laugh. Roshchin dissolves the philosophies of the two Pyotrs in rock-ribbing mirth. He compounds the fun by skillfully portraying the denouement in parallel scenes in which both Pyotrs and their households practically repeat the same phrases and go through the same motions, simultaneously. It all comes to a hilarious climax in a delightfully funny bath-house scene, where the two Pyotrs and their cronies meet. Relaxed and stripped to bedsheet coverings, the two Pyotrs commiserate with one another. In the process they demolish their own philosophies, but without injuring their own pride—they, characteristically enough, attribute these concepts to their absent wives. Here mention should be made of the elderly worker, Ivan Adamych, played with down-to-earth humor by Yevgeny Yevstigneyev, an extremely capable and versatile actor. Adamych is used as a sort of a Soviet man-in-the-street version of the Greek chorus, who adds the footnotes when necessary (which, fortunately, never degenerates into maudlin sentimentality). The actors, in-

cidentally, threw themselves quite whole-heartedly into their parts. You felt they were partaking in Roshchin's debunking with relish. And the prolonged rhythmic applause revealed that the audience was also joining in the act. Perhaps for me, as one who came from a world where the philosophy of the two Pyotrs was hardly exposed to ridicule, Roshchin's play and, particularly, the audience's reaction had a different meaning than for the Soviet theater-goer. Unbridled individualism is hardly a subject for mirth on our stage. It is rarely a theme of our plays. On the contrary, it is the extension of individualism that is usually stressed. It is understandable in our society, although hardly the most effective way to overcome the very ills against which the individual is often depicted in rebellion. Roshchin's play, and the reaction to it, reveal that individualism (as distinct from full opportunity for the creative development and expression of the individual) has no future in the land of socialism. The philosophy of individualism, indeed, has a hollow ring when sounded in a Soviet theater, because it is so out of tune with Soviet reality which daily demonstrates the harmony between the individual and the collective in the vast construction projects, in the opportunities for the expanding talents of the Soviet people. Soviet theater itself is living proof of this unity.

"The Old New Year" and "Steelworkers" were significant for another reason. Though hardly enough on which to base any conclusions, they demonstrated that the Moscow Art Theater was beginning to hit its stride on the contemporary Soviet scene.

## For an Honest Look at Soviet Theater and Life

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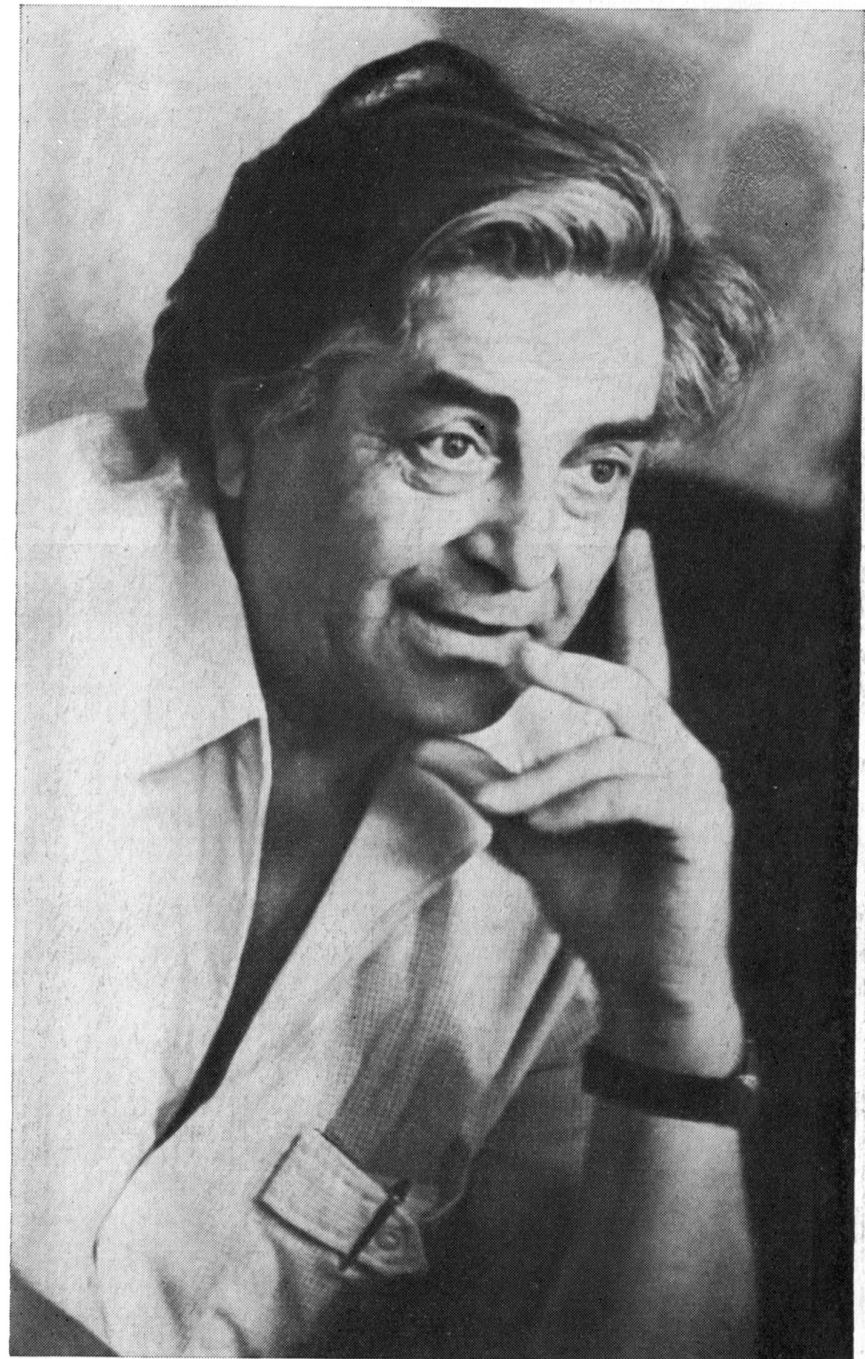
Another play which sharply grapples with ethical and moral problems in the struggle to mold communist man and woman is the deeply probing "Ascent to Mount Fuji" by Chinghiz Aitmatov and Kaltai Mukhamejanov. It is staged by the Sovremennik Theater under Galina Volchek's effective direction. Where "Steelworkers", "The Man from Outside", "Maria" focus on the struggle for a communist attitude to work at the point of production, the plant and project, "Mount Fuji" deals with philosophic and moral questions on a broader scale. Its characters come from the Soviet intelligentsia but the theme encompasses questions that are of concern to the entire Soviet society. It is a powerful blow against the philistinism that still clings to some people in socialist society. Its targets are intellectual cowardice and dishonesty, self-seeking, those who, in the first place, care for their own skins. It is a stirring appeal (without any clarion calls) for integrity, concern for others, courage to stand up for one's convictions as well as for the honest convictions of others. The story provided the setting for honest, philosophic probing of some of the seamy sides

of some people in Soviet society. Four friends, whose friendship dates from childhood (and three of their wives) gather on a mountain top in Kirghizia for a reunion and a nostalgic recalling of memories. Their beloved childhood teacher joins them. From light banter they finally come to grips with a past which disturbs them all and which none of them had wanted to recall. They are prodded into this confrontation by a game of truth they all jocularly embark on: the legend has it that one goes to Fujiyama and speaks only the truth to justify one's life before God. The game of truth provides Aitmatov and Muhamejanov with a dramatic platform to discuss a wide range of moral questions. From a casual recital of their own lives, the game finally gets serious. This occurs when it focuses on Sabur, one of the schoolboy-friends who is absent from the reunion. It is obvious that, to one degree or another, all feel a sense of guilt in respect to their treatment of Sabur at a crucial moment in the past. Sabur, who was a gifted poet, was the apple of their eye. Gradually, what happened to Sabur and how they acted when he confronted his ordeal, is revealed. The five friends (including Sabur) had volunteered to fight in the Great Patriotic War when they were 17. They fought together in the same battalion. Sabur wrote passionate, inspiring verse in the Kirghiz language, which he read to his four admiring friends. However, being an extremely sensitive, idealistic and politically immature youth, who was sick at heart at the terrible blood-letting of war, Sabur wrote a pacifist poem which, in effect, suggested that Soviet forces consider the war over, once the Nazi invaders were expelled from all Soviet territory. His friends, of course, sharply disagreed with Sabur and one (the most honest) even almost came to blows with him. Sabur was taken to army headquarters, convicted, and imprisoned for his poem. Like many others who were harshly treated in the period of the Stalin personality cult, Sabur later was recalled from exile and rehabili-



tated. But he was broken by the experience and his talent crushed.

The play then focuses on the question: which of the four friends had informed on Sabur? It had to be one of them, since the poem was written in the Kirghiz language. The four friends were the only ones of that nationality in the battalion, and it was only read to them. But the play raises more than the question of who informed. It raises the question: what should be the attitude toward creative people who stumble in their honest search for humanity in man? Sabur, it turns out in the heated debate on the mountain, never made any effort to propagate his pacifist views or to circulate his poem. It was just for his private notebook. Hence, there was no question of undermining the morale of the Soviet armed forces in their fulfillment of the historic mission life had thrust upon them—liberating Europe and saving the world from fascism. All four friends took the same firm position against Sabur's poems. But where differences developed was on how to deal with Sabur. One, particularly, a professor of history and the head of an institute, justifies the harsh treatment of Sabur because, he says, the thinking in Sabur's poem was dangerous whether it was kept to himself or not. Another, obviously expressing the views of the authors, declares that Sabur's honest and deep feelings for humanity, notwithstanding his error, would have eventually led him in the right direction. It was this quality in Sabur that was of lasting value and which, if developed in the post-war period, would have made him a great contemporary poet. Aitmatov and Mukhamejanov bring the moral questions up-to-date to show that they are not solely linked with the stresses of the war or with the period of the personality cult. After the game of truth becomes too sharp and recriminative, the four friends (who also had a few drinks) turn to a childhood sport—competing with each other as to who can throw stones the farthest from the mountain top.



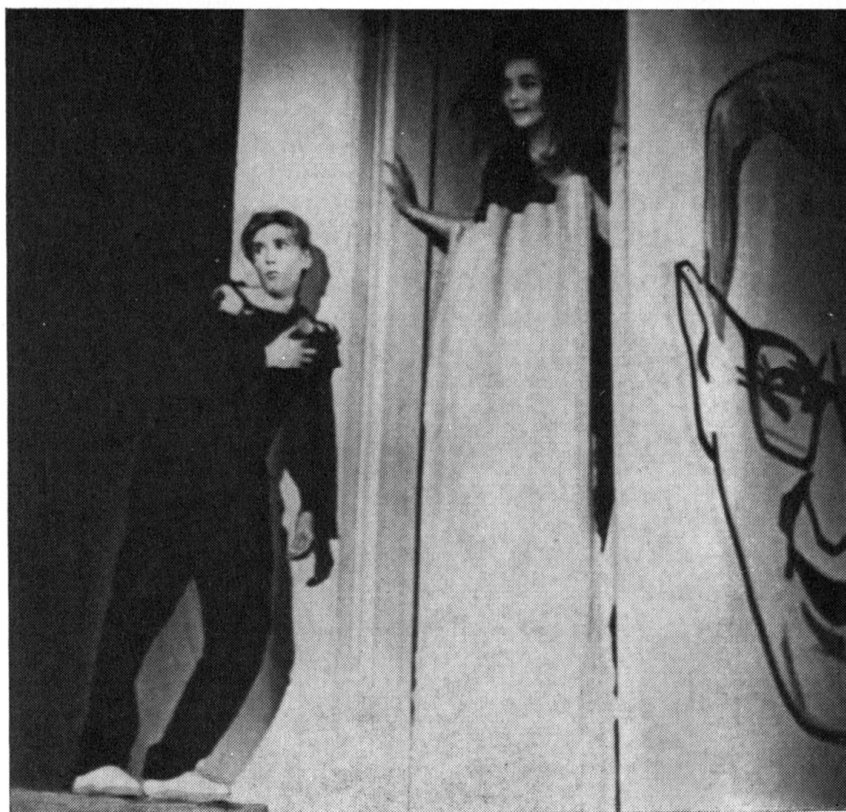
The Theater  
of Drama and Comedy  
on Taganka Square, Moscow



"The Good Woman of Czechwan"  
by Bertolt Brecht, 1963



Bertolt Brecht's  
"Galileo"

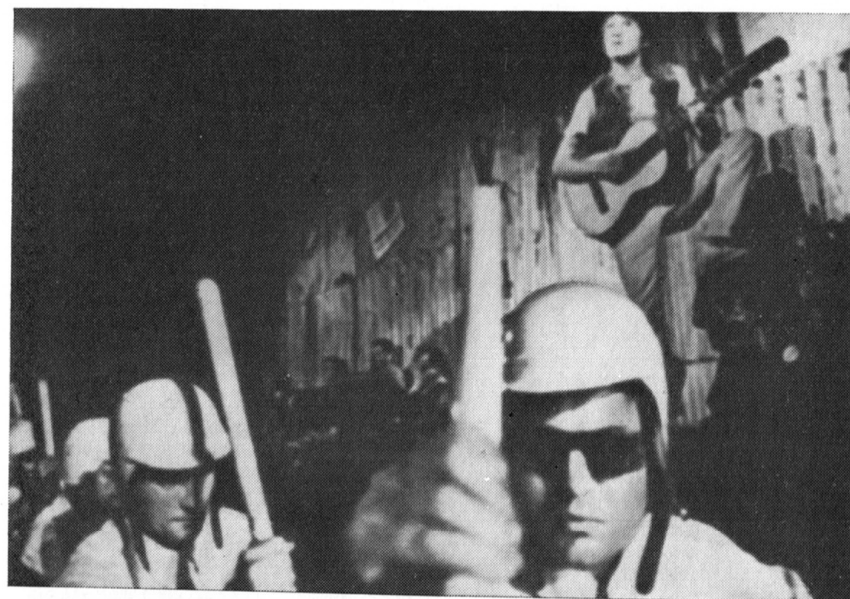


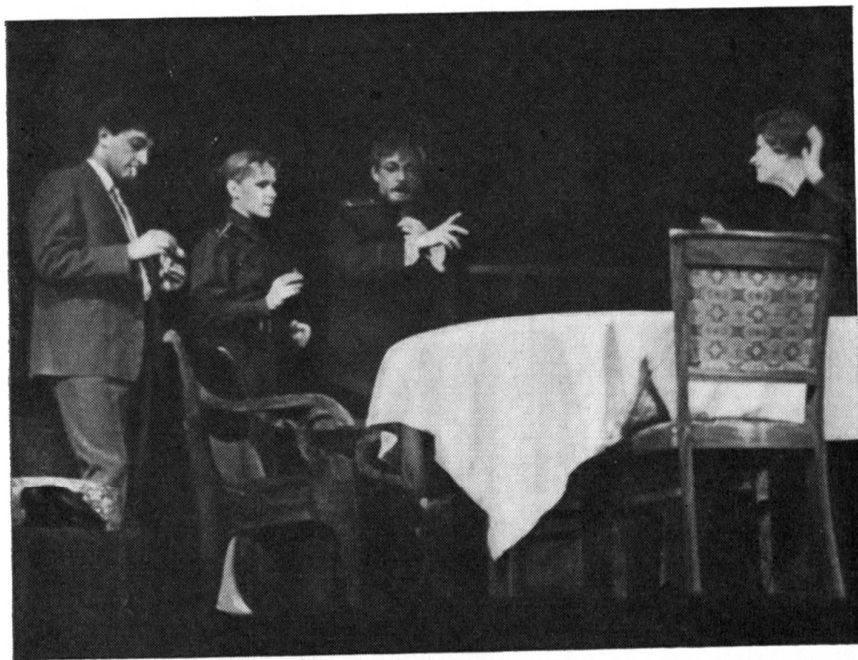


"The Dawns Are Quiet Here",  
dramatization of  
Boris Vasilyev's story,  
1971



"Under the Skin  
of the Statue of Liberty"  
by Yevgeny Yevtushenko







"Bolsheviks"  
by Mikhail Shatrov,  
1967

"Balalaikin and Co."  
by Sergei Mikhalkov, 1973

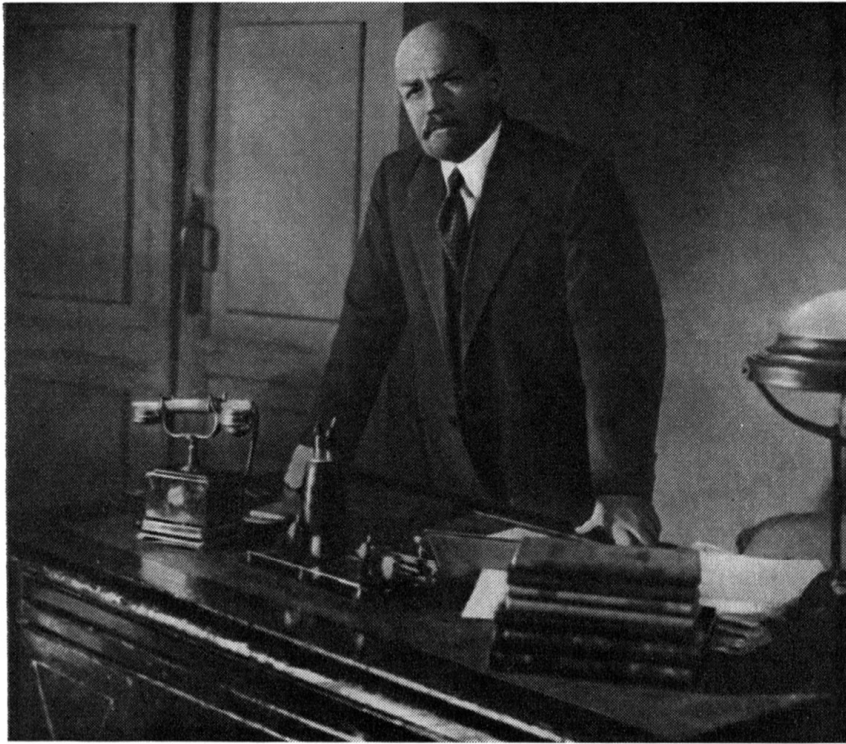


Chapter III  
*Vakhtangov Theater*

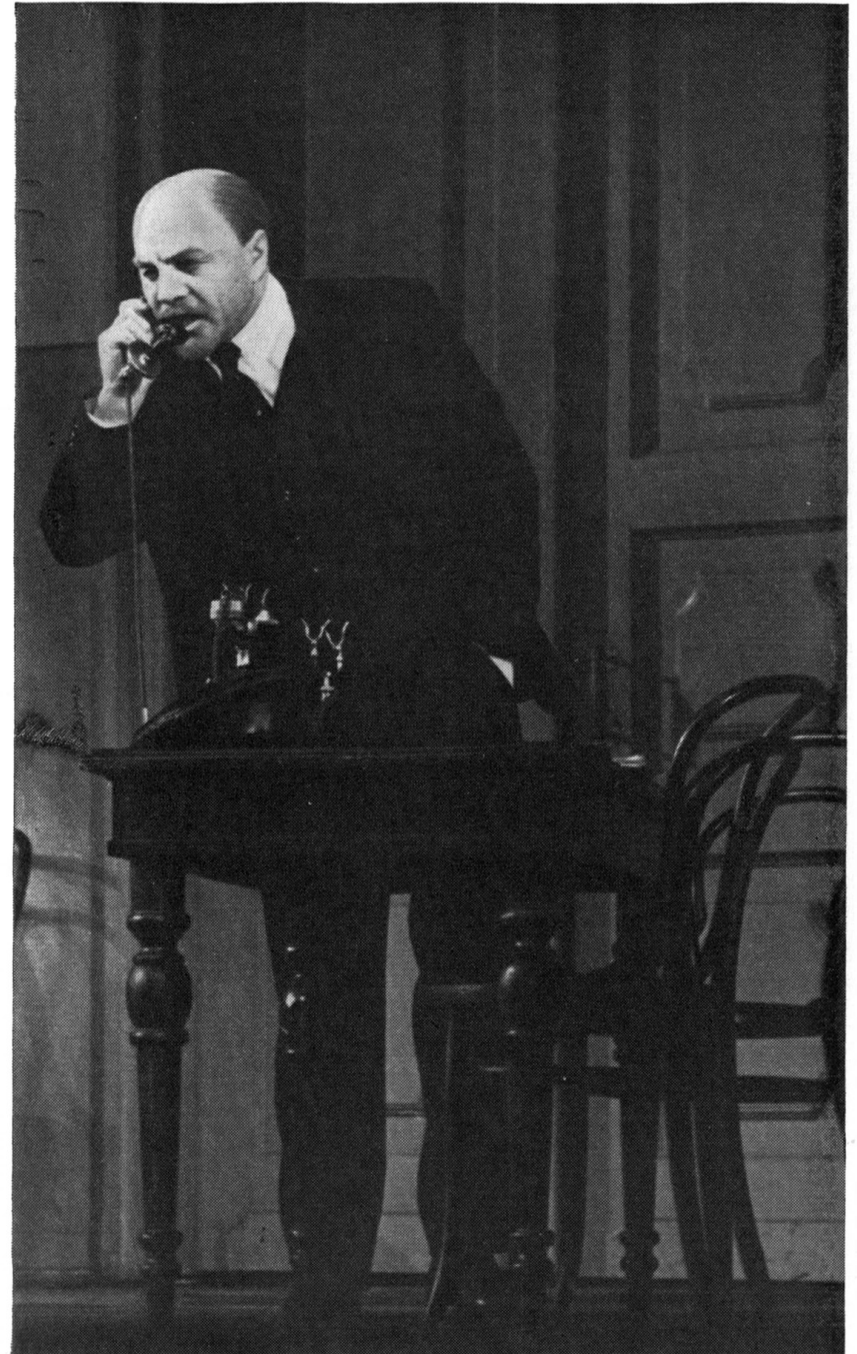
"Princess Turandot"  
by Carlo Gozzi, 1963



Nikolai Pogodin's  
"The Man with the Rifle".  
Boris Shchukin (1937)

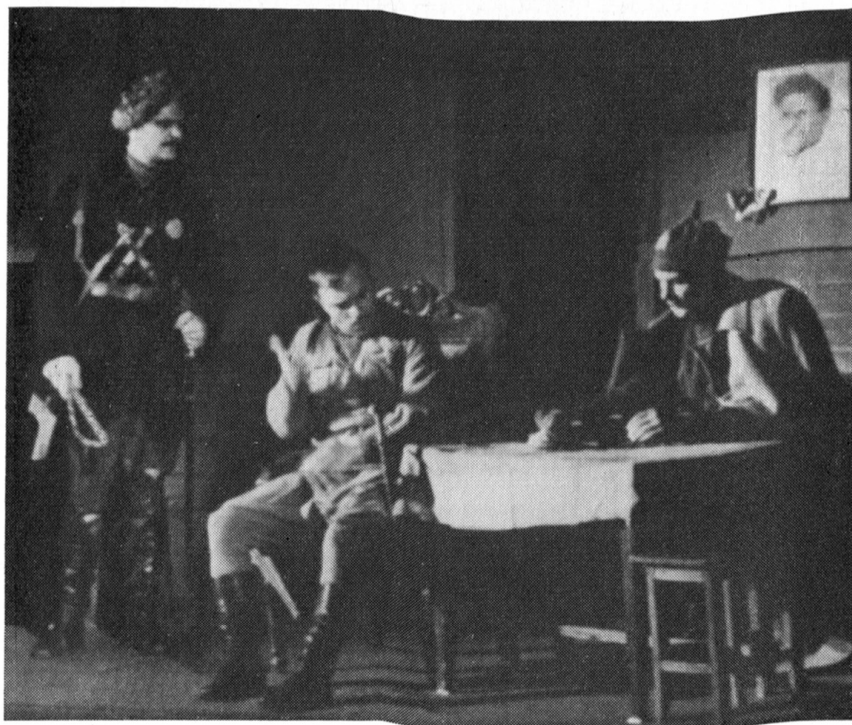
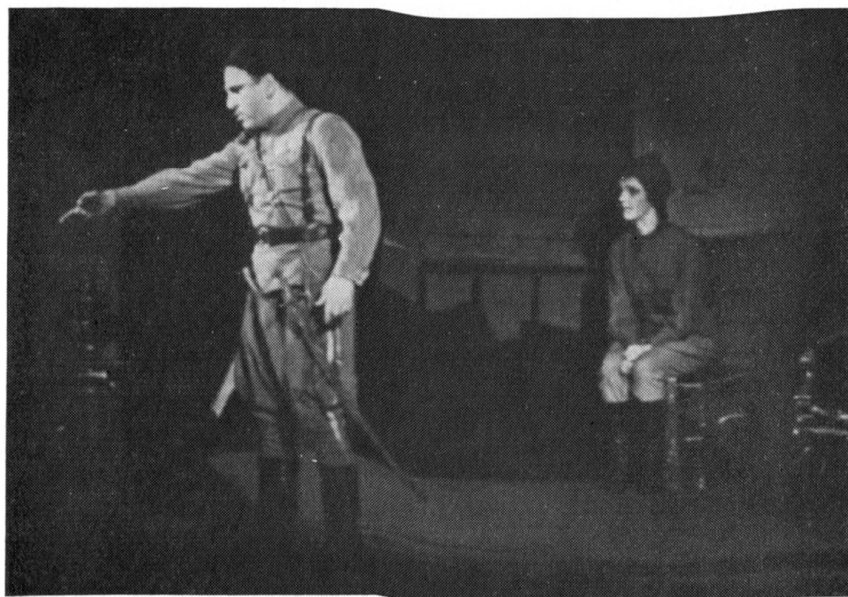


and Mikhail Ulyanov (1970)  
as Lenin



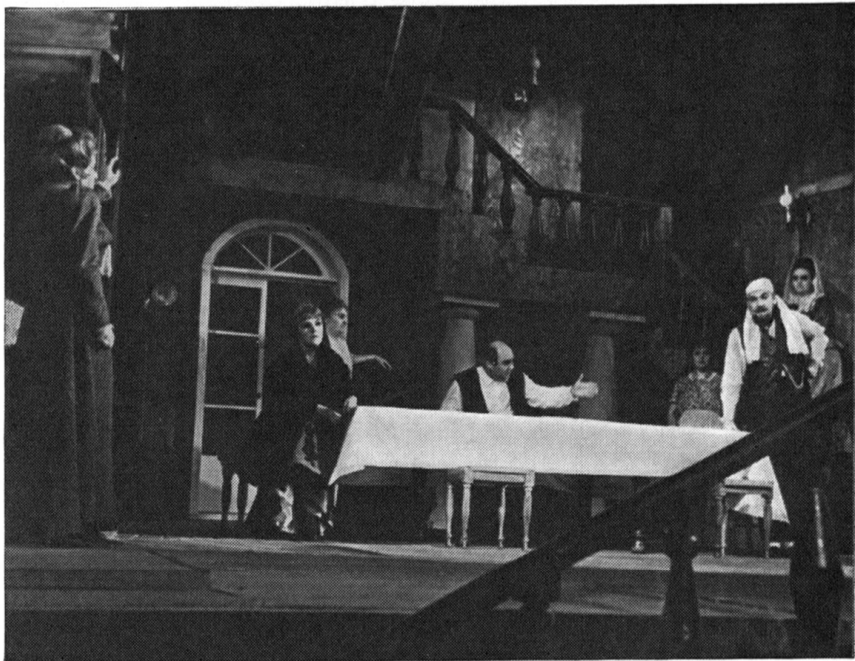
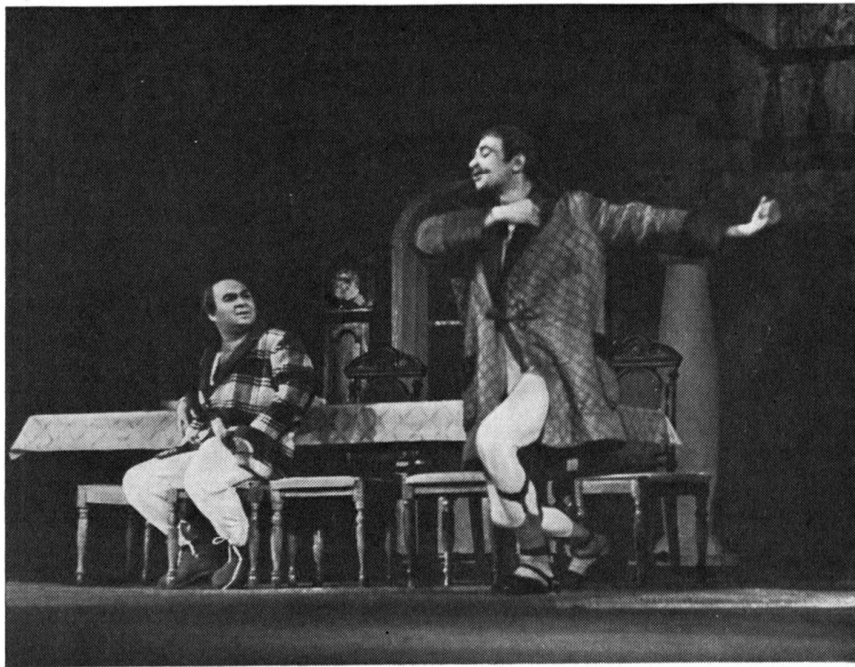


"The Mounted Army",  
based on Iosif Babel's works,  
1966



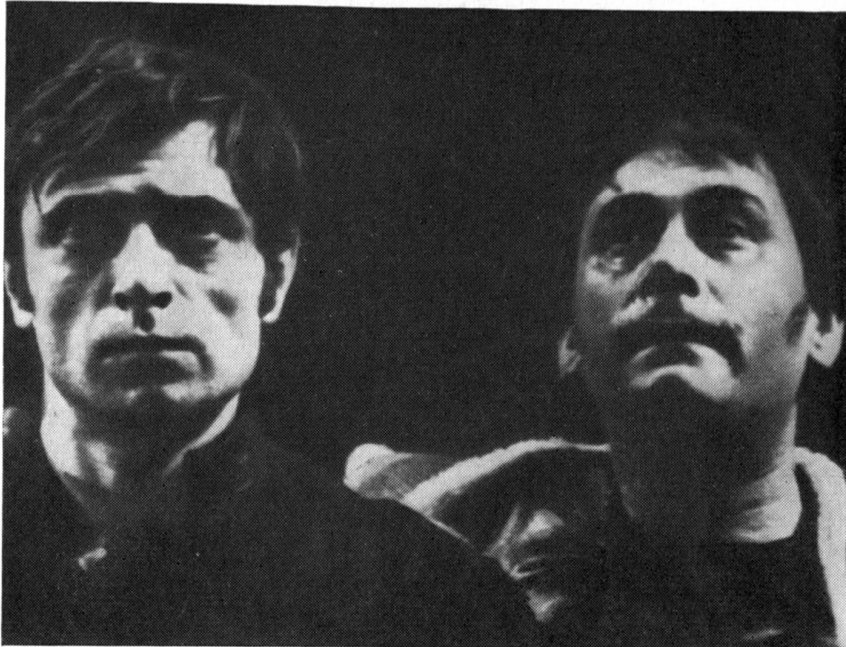
"Idiot", dramatization of  
Dostoyevsky's novel,  
1958  
Yevgeny Vakhtangov



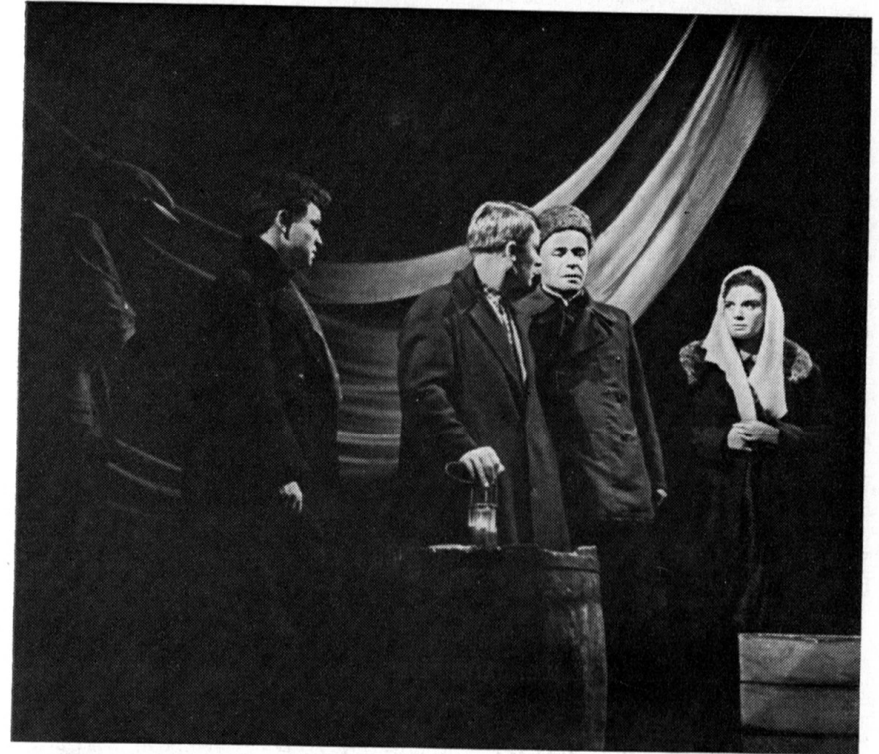




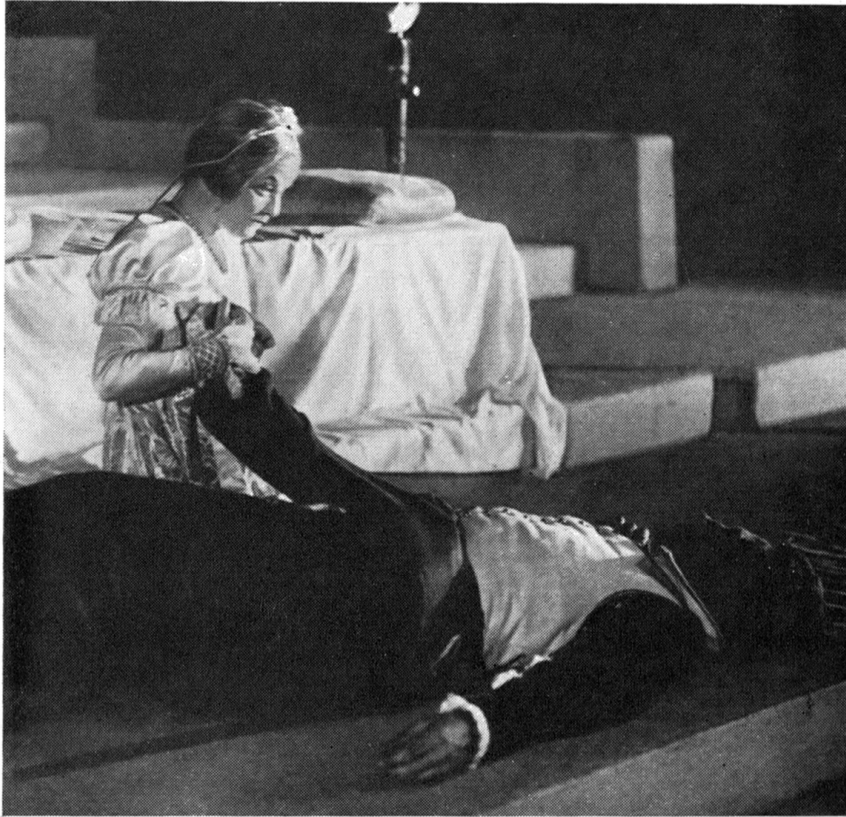
"Maria"  
by Afanasy Salynsky  
"The End of Book Six"  
by Erzy Brozkiewicz,  
1969



"Young Guard", dramatization  
of Alexander Fadeyev's novel

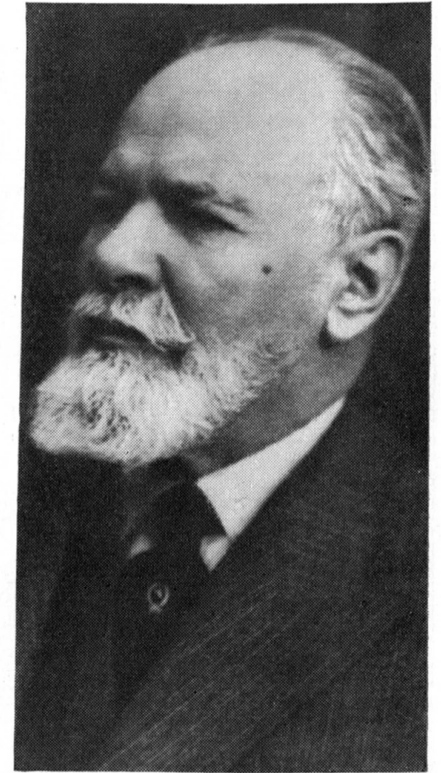


"Romeo and Juliet"  
by William Shakespeare,  
1935



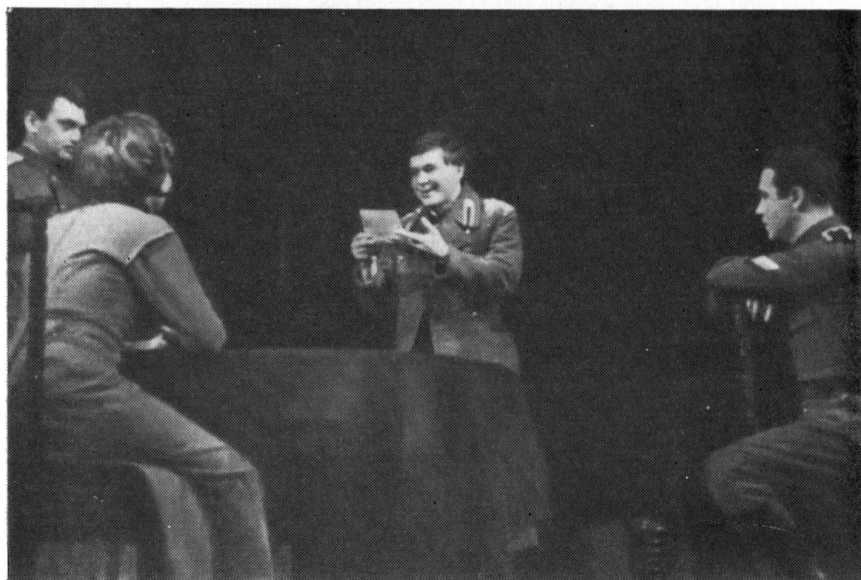
Chapter III  
*Moscow Art Theater*

Konstantin Stanislavsky  
Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko  
Oleg Yefremov





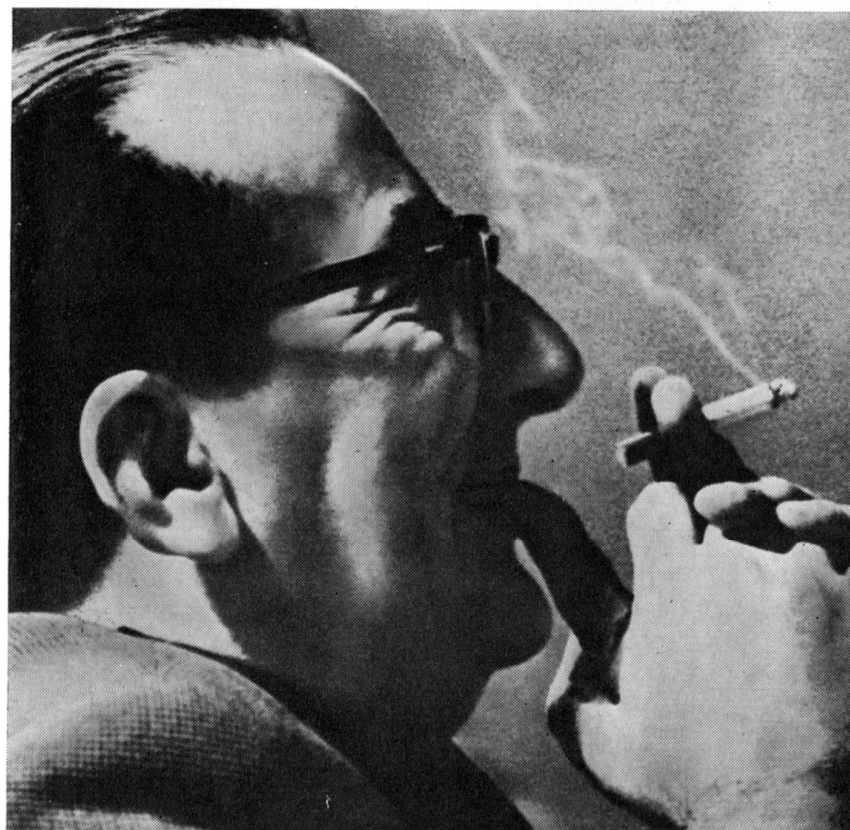
Chekhov's  
"The Three Sisters"



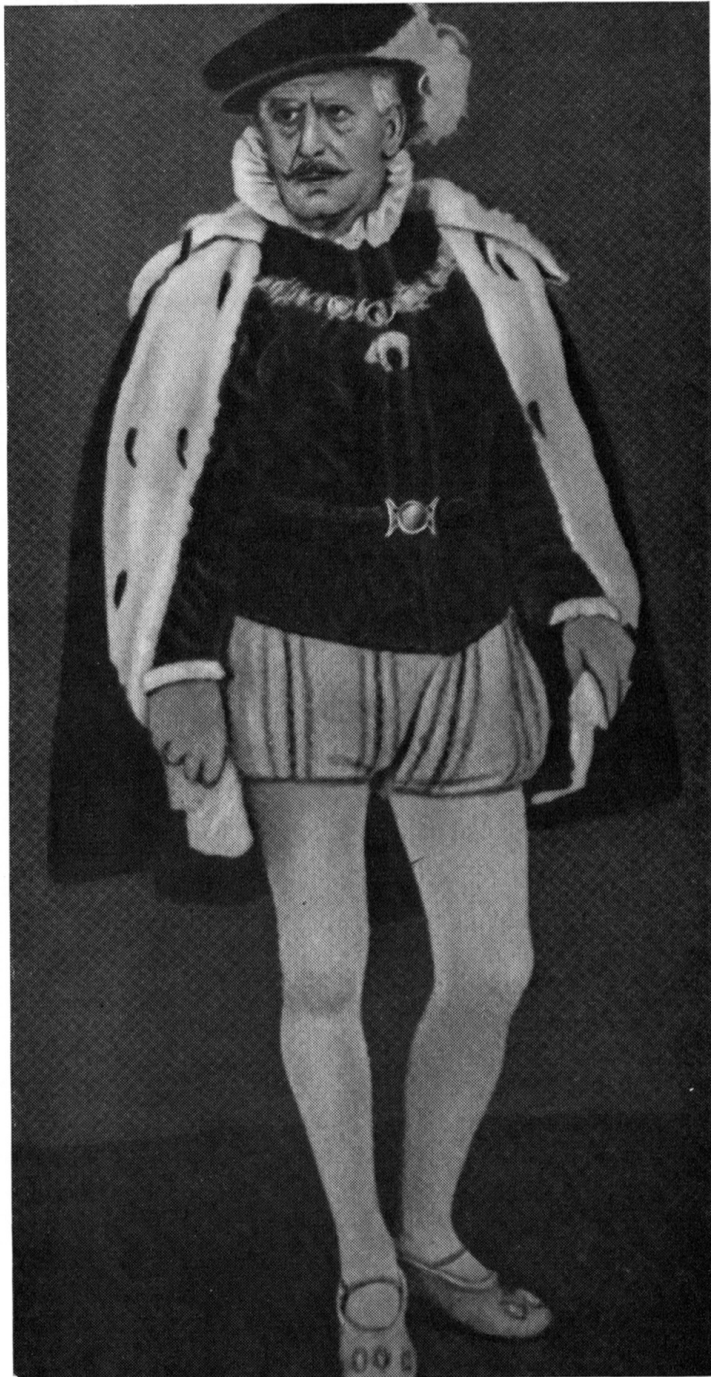
"Days of the Turbins"  
by Mikhail Bulgakov

Chapter IV.  
*Leningrad Bolshoi  
Dramatic Theater  
named after Gorky*

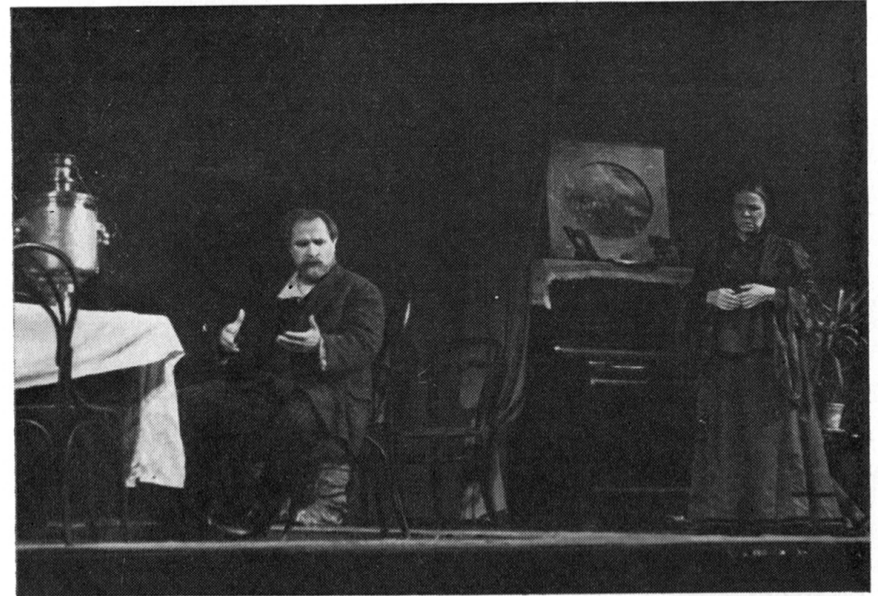
Georgi Tovstonogov  
at a rehearsal



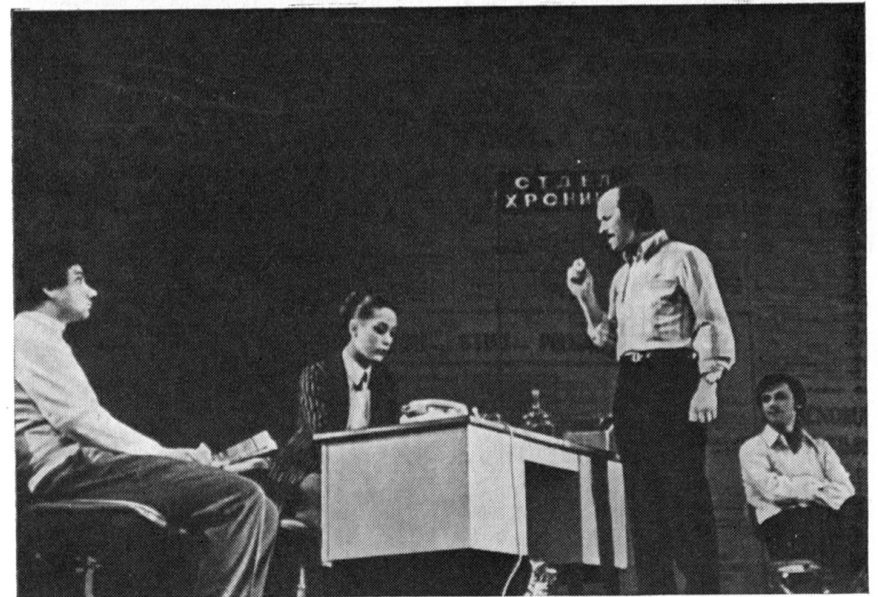
"Don Carlos"  
by F. Schiller (1919)



Maxim Gorky's  
"The Philistines", 1967

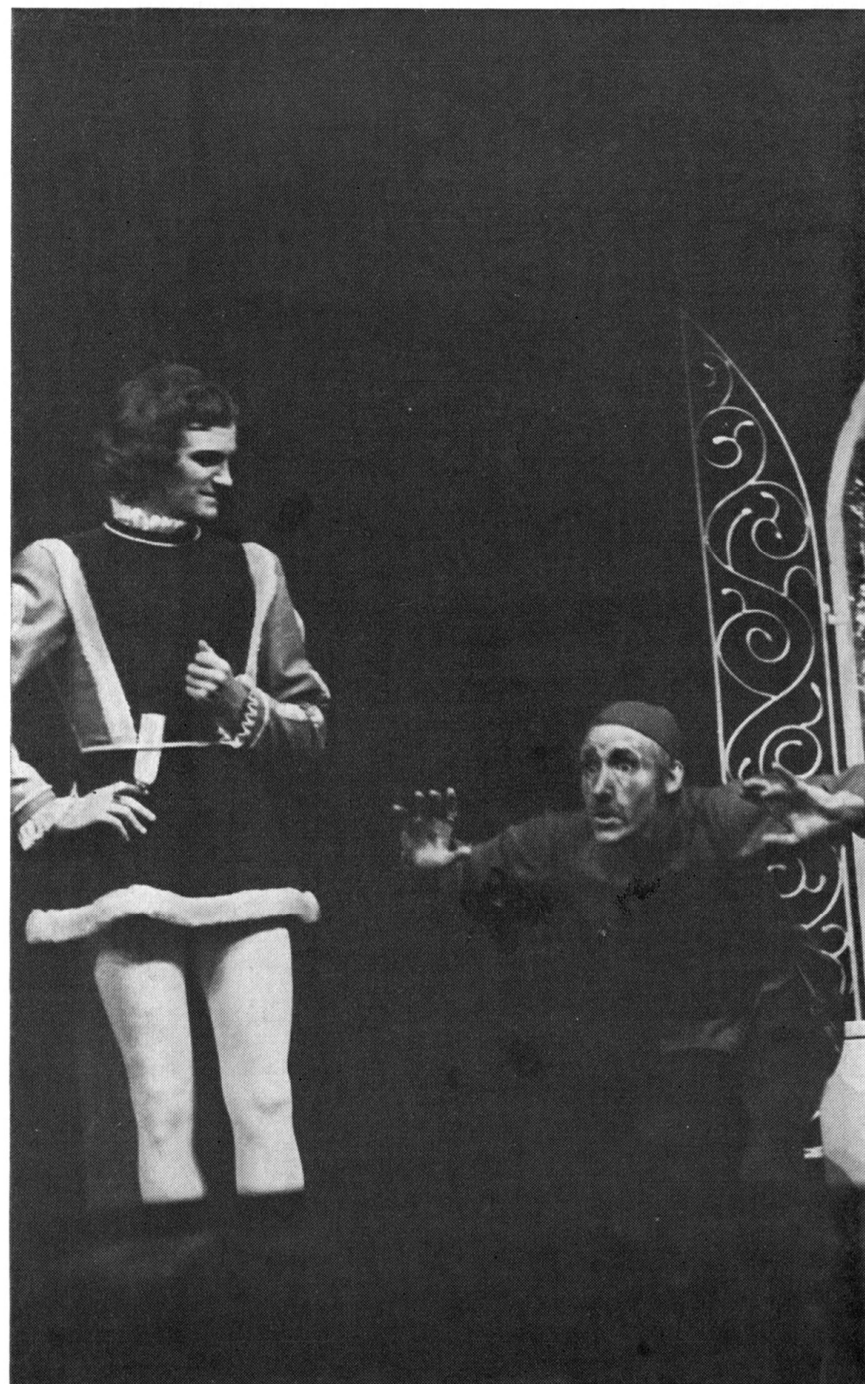
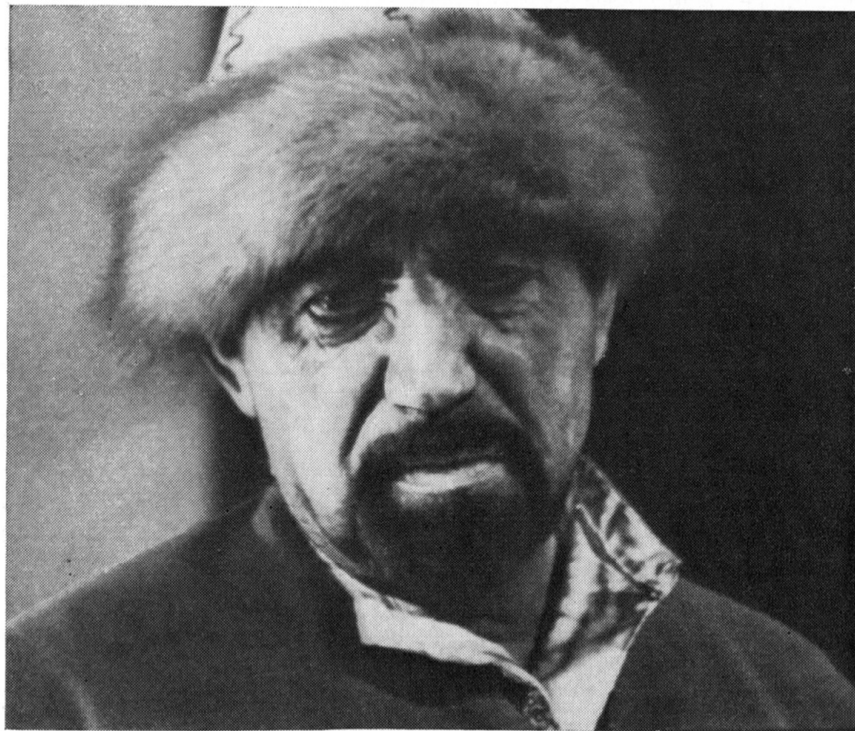


"Public Opinion"  
by A. Baranga







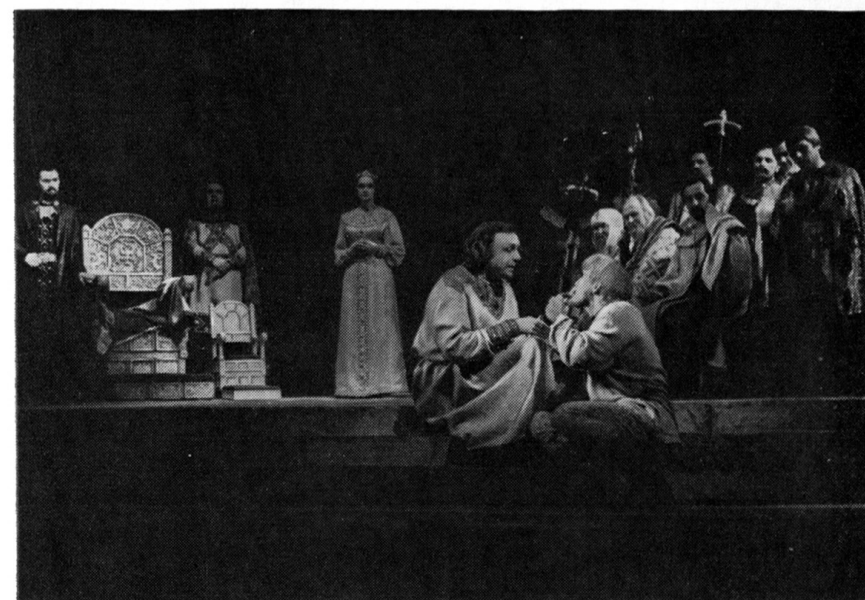




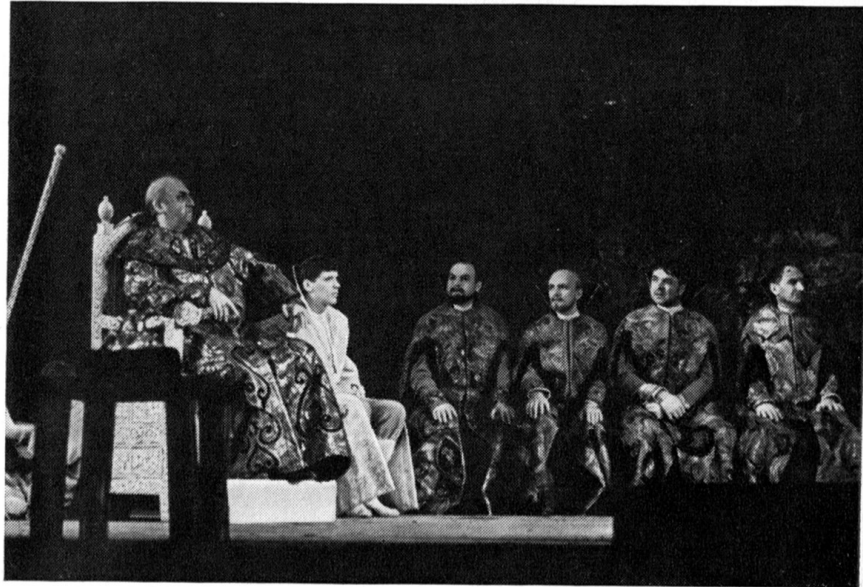
"Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich"  
by A. K. Tolstoy, produced  
by the Moscow Art Theater, 1898.  
(Ivan Moskvín)



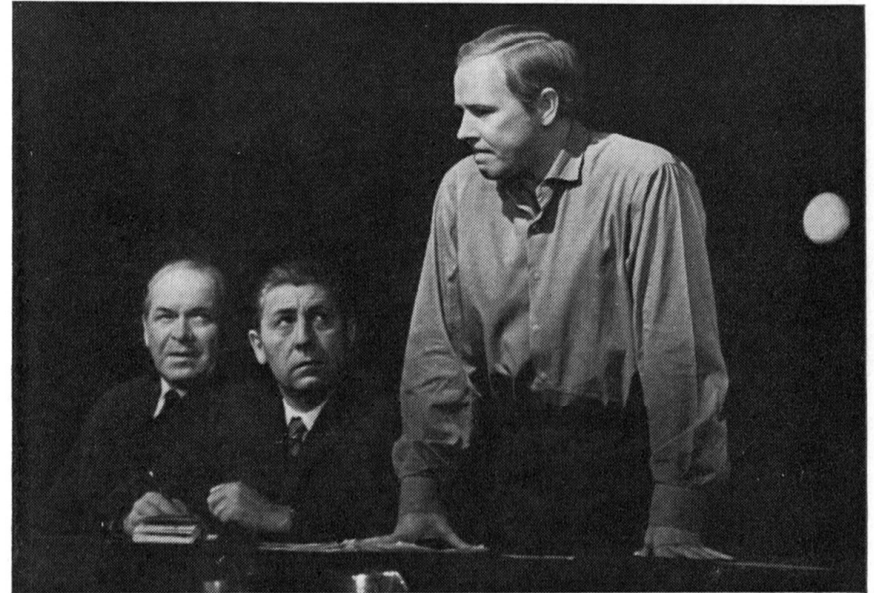
Innokenty Smoktunovsky  
as Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich.  
Maly Theater, 1973



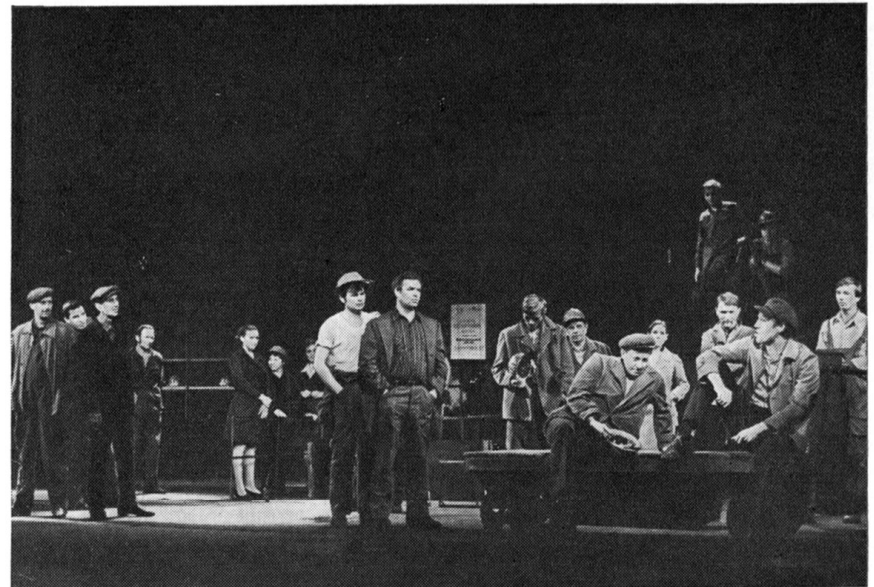
"The Death of Ivan the Terrible"  
by A. K. Tolstoy, 1966  
as staged by  
the Central Soviet Army Theater



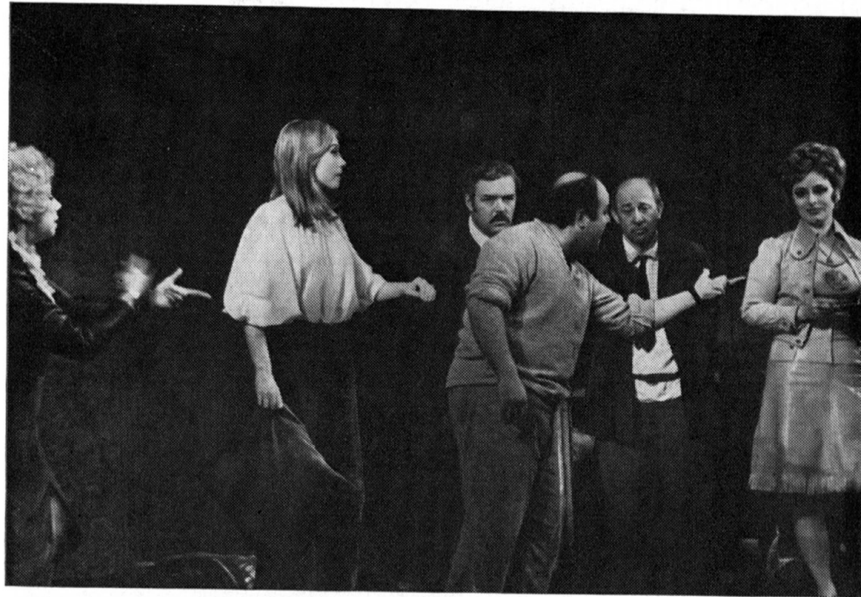
"The Man from Outside"  
as staged by  
the Moscow Dramatic Theater  
on Malaya Bronnaya, 1971



"Steelworkers"  
by Gennady Bokarev,  
produced by the Art Theater  
in Moscow, 1972







Then, relaxed somewhat from their tensions, they go to sleep in their tent.

In the morning they resume their discussion on Sabur. Suddenly, their discussion is interrupted by a worker from a nearby collective farm, who appears on the scene and asks them if they had spent the night on the mountain. At first they good-humoredly admit they did. Their attitude, however, changes abruptly when the worker informs them that an elderly woman from the collective farm was struck and killed by a stone, obviously thrown from their direction. Shocked and scared, the four are once again confronted with a question of moral integrity, conscience and concern for their fellow-men. Under the prodding of the history professor they refuse to give their names when the worker requests information and tells them the militia is on its way to the mountain.

This gives rise to a division. One by one, three find some reason to leave before the militia arrives. Only the school teacher, who in the course of the discussion on Sabur had emerged as the most honest and conscience-stricken, and the wife of the agronomist (also the school teacher's childhood sweetheart) remain to face the militia. Soon, the agronomist also returns shamefacedly. Thus, three confront their consciences. Their action also makes clear none of them was Sabur's informer. The audience (and this writer) literally hung on every word (the 2 1/2-hour play was performed without a break). Its one weakness, I felt, was that in its commendable stress on the fight for humanity in man it tends to be somewhat classless in its approach. This I found to be a weakness in a number of good contemporary Soviet plays. The answer to the question (raised in one of Sabur's poems): "How can a man be a human being?" is altogether different in Soviet and in our, capitalist society. But the powerful and much needed message of the play far overshadows this flaw.

Now, what would objective U.S. viewers make of this

play? I think they would recognize that it reflected the deep concern of the playwrights, the theater and Soviet society as a whole, with moral and ethical problems which still exist under socialism. They would be impressed with the forthright presentation of the problems and would correctly conclude that by holding up a mirror to these repulsive characteristics, Soviet theater and society were effectively performing their functions in the struggle to eradicate them. And those more familiar with Soviet life would regard the play as part of a vigorous cultural effort to grapple with tenacious repugnant influences of past societies that were also nurtured by the excesses of the period of the Stalin personality cult.

But for Robert Kaiser, Moscow correspondent of the *Washington Post*, Aitmatov's honest and probing play only served as an opportunity for moth-eaten anti-Soviet speculations. Like his predecessor, Astrakhan, Kaiser obviously visited the *Sovremennik* in pursuit of the scent of dissent. The reader is immediately set up for this search by the headline which blares at him: "SOVIET PLAY ASKS QUESTION". Before the reader has time to ask "what question?", Kaiser not only supplies the question but the implied answer: "WHO BEARS THE GUILT FOR THE STALIN PAST? To make sure the reader gets the message, Kaiser tells him that the "play's authors leave the audience with the conclusion that those who were silent about Stalin's crimes share the guilt for them". This is in line with the theme that for obvious reasons has been pounded on by "Sovietologists" since the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1956) did something no bourgeois party in history ever had the courage to do—when it revealed the terrible and tragic errors of the period of the Stalin personality cult. More, it established the guarantees for fully restoring Soviet legality and democracy. But the enemies of the Soviet Union were never really interested in Stalin or the excesses—their target was and remains the Soviet

Communist Party and socialist society. That is why they try to portray these excesses as inherent in the Communist Party and socialism. That is why they incessantly harp on the excesses of the Stalin period and piously proclaim that all "those who were silent share the guilt". For Kaiser, as for all "Sovietologists", it is only the dead victims of the excesses who possessed "integrity". Incidentally, the return of the "Stalin period" has been regularly predicted by many US correspondents of the big business press.

Thus, I recall, on the eve of the historic 24th Congress of the CPSU they proclaimed that the Congress would usher in a return to those days. But Kaiser faces an extremely difficult problem. The very existence, performance, and popularity of the play undermines his objective of linking the Soviet Communist Party, the Soviet Government and society to the excesses of the personality cult period. Despite all his twists and turns, and working all sides of the anti-Soviet street, Kaiser can't make out a case. He ends up by meeting himself coming and going.

He sets up all kinds of straw men but to no avail. As he confesses, he come up against what he calls a MYSTERY: "HOW COULD THIS PLAY APPEAR NOW? (My emphasis—M.D.—at a time of relative inflexibility." (Kaiser was a poor prophet as events, especially improved US-USSR relations, detente and growing cultural exchange, have demonstrated.) In his effort to solve the "mystery" Kaiser comes up with some prize answers. "The identity of the author may be the best single explanation," he says as he points out that Chinghiz Aitmatov is a winner of a Lenin Prize, the highest Soviet literary award. But that alone is not the reason, says Kaiser. Equally, if not more important, is that Aitmatov is a "Central Asian Kirghiz by nationality" (!!!) Here Kaiser jumps to the other side of the anti-Soviet street.

The authorities who permitted the play which has Kaiser gasping in surprise are "cultural bureaucrats".



Moreover, (sin of sins!) "they are said to be sympathetic to prize winners and to REPRESENTATIVES OF THE SOVIET UNION'S NATIONAL MINORITIES". (My emphasis—*M.D.*) Kaiser goes so far as to agree with an anonymous "Russian writer" who supposedly told him that if the play had been written by a Russian it would "not have been produced".

This is quite a different tune from the one Kaiser and most of our press generally carry on days when they are not "reviewing" such plays. The main refrain in the usual anti-Soviet chorus has been and is, as everyone knows, the so-called "suppression" of the cultures of the non-Russian peoples, the forced "Russification" of the peoples of the Soviet Union. Kaiser himself, not too long before this play-review, wrote a piece in that vein on Estonia and the Baltic Republics. But try to figure out this tortured reasoning. Aitmatov's play, according to Kaiser, is against the "official line", but he states: "Despite all that, an apparently orchestrated chorus of support for 'Mount Fuji' has appeared in numerous Soviet newspapers. Theater critics and several literary figures have published flattering reviews of the play." Why? Simply because they think it is a good play? Not on your life—only critics and literary figures in the U.S. (like Kaiser, for example) can judge a play on its merits. In the Soviet Union, there is always some sinister political motive, even if it is difficult for Kaiser's poor readers to make heads or tails of his gyrations. The reason why praise for the play appeared, says Kaiser, is because "apparently there is an attempt to create the appearance of widespread approval before hard-line critics can muster their forces against the play". Thus, Kaiser covers every side of the anti-Soviet street, the "cultural bureaucrats" who approved the play and the "hard-liners" who will oppose it. Kaiser's "review", incidentally, politically characterizes the play in six long paragraphs before informing the reader what it was all about. Kaiser's "review" helps ex-

plain why there are so many misconceptions about Soviet theater and literature in the U.S. Unfortunately, it is through such eyes that the U.S. reader usually gets his information on these subjects.

A similar approach to Soviet culture in general and to the performing arts in particular is revealed in a snide article by the political commentator Joseph Kraft in the *International Herald Tribune*, April 30, 1971. It is an embarrassing piece that hardly does justice to American journalism and that displays the writer's own poor taste as well as ignorance of Soviet theater and performing arts generally. Incidentally, for some reason, many U.S. journalists feel free to take liberties with ordinary decencies of journalism when it comes to the Soviet Union. If Kraft had truly cared about "the state of the performing arts here in Moscow", as he pretends, he would have made an effort to learn some of the things that I, earlier, dealt with here. An objective evaluation, if he "cared" about the state of performing in the U.S., would lead him to draw comparisons that would hardly be favorable to us. Kraft characterizes as "grim" a cultural atmosphere that for the first time in history has rescued the theater and the performing arts from its narrow esoteric shell and brought them to the mass of people, that has saved actors, writers, artists from the tyranny of the financial "angels" and the box office, that has made it possible for members of the performing arts to work at their professions permanently, that, in a word, has freed culture from its commodity enslavement. One would expect a little modesty from someone who should be certainly aware that his characterization more aptly applies to the state of affairs in our own country.

Kraft holds up the renowned Obraztsov Puppet Theater as a prime example of the low state of Soviet arts. He states that a "visit to the Puppet Theater was like an evening with Ed Sullivan" (the U.S. impresario known for his superficial T.V. extravaganzas). Obraztsov and his

world-famous puppet theater can survive the comparison. It is interesting that, aside from everything else, Kraft had nothing to say about the external appearance and facilities of the theater which in itself is a work of art unequalled in this field. Nowhere in the world has this ancient and truly people's art been accorded such a home, such support, such opportunity for development as in the Soviet Union. In typical brash fashion, Kraft in one fell sweep sums up Moscow's rich theater life as containing only "one superb play on the boards"—Andrei Voznesensky's "Anti-Worlds" at the Taganka Theater. I saw "Anti-Worlds" and it is an excellent dramatization of Voznesensky's sensitive, probing poetry. It is hardly "the one superb play on the boards" for even the Taganka Theater, as I described. But it is "superb" for Kraft, it appears, not for cultural reasons but for the political capital he believes he can derive by portraying Voznesensky as a "suppressed" voice. Thus, he gets down to the real business after paying his formal tribute. Kraft's interpreter quoted Voznesensky as saying in one poem, loosely translated, that "I cannot write in times like this". I can hear Kraft, like his colleague Astrakhan, urging his Russian interpreter to "catch the nuances". Kraft portrays Voznesensky as a silenced voice. A similar tune is sung by Harrison Salisbury who once built up an undeserved reputation for "objective" reporting. Salisbury has long since descended to tendentious innuendos and downright misinformation based on "sources" and unadulterated anti-Sovietism. Thus, Salisbury reported Soviet people "seldom read the works of Yevgeny Yevtushenko". But, unfortunately for Kraft and Salisbury, this hardly conforms with the facts. Billboards in Moscow announced a public poetry recital by Voznesensky on May Day, 1973. And only a short time before Voznesensky, together with a group of Soviet writers, participated in a literary tour of Murmansk. Voznesensky's flaming poem in tribute to Pablo Neruda was published in *Pravda*, September 28,

1973 (circulation about 8 million). As for Yevtushenko, his poems appear quite regularly in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* and *Pravda*, the organ of the CPSU, and his play, "Under the Skin of the Statue of Liberty" (a dramatization of his poems), is playing to packed audiences in the Taganka Theater. Kraft also weeps over the sorry state of the Soviet cinema and refers to the film "Flight", a deeply moving screen adaptation of some of the best works by Mikhail Bulgakov, who was one of the most gifted of Soviet writers (the film was given added authenticity by the guidance of Bulgakov's widow, who herself passed away shortly before it was released). Kraft concedes that the White Guards in the film "do not come off entirely as bad guys", only the better to come up with the thrust: "they come off as clowns instead". This is not only a superficial judgement of a major film, it is untrue. Khlyudov, the imperial White Guard general, is depicted as a man of dignity and depth despite his cruelty in the Civil War against the Revolution. So is another tsarist general portrayed by the famous Soviet actor, Mikhail Ulyanov. Among other things, "Flight" demonstrates not only the humanism of Soviet art, but its remarkable objectivity. With all the hue and cry about communist "propaganda" in art, Hollywood has yet to treat a Communist, Soviet or American, with the understanding and objectivity that "Flight" displays in respect to White Guard generals and officers.

Kraft weeps over the "decline of cultural achievement" in the Soviet Union, and what hurts him most, he says between sobs, is that "except for a tiny minority, nobody in the Soviet Union really cares". And why?—Because the people "have gone ape about consumer goods". This is the new look in anti-Sovietism (drawing heavily on Maoism) designed for the period of rapid Soviet advancement in raising the material and living conditions of the people. Its objective is the same as all the rest of the half-century history of anti-Sovietism, only it is the other



side of the anti-Soviet street. When the Soviet Union, as a result of the ravages of the Civil War and the Great Patriotic War and the necessary sacrifices that had to be made to achieve industrialization by lifting itself up by its own bootstraps, had to tighten its belt on consumer goods, it was denounced as a society of poverty. Now that the 9th Five-Year Plan and the historic 24th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union have signalized the substantial advances in improving the living standards of the people, it is being condemned as a "consumer society". And usually the cry comes from those like Kraft who never in their lives have known what it is "not to consume".

Continuing with his Olympian judgements, Kraft characterizes the Soviet cultural atmosphere as a "kind of popular philistinism, something like what the U.S. MUST HAVE KNOWN in the heyday of William Jennings Bryan". (My emphasis—*M.D.*) It takes real brass for one coming from a society that is the world's prime example of philistinism, symbolized by Lieutenant Calley, Watergate and the assassination and murder of the Kennedy brothers, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X., George Jackson and where culture is treated as a commodity, to lecture anyone about philistinism and to have to go back to William Jennings Bryan to find a U.S. equivalent! But the pay off is this final smug conclusion: "And the ideals that animate those of us in the U.S. when we are at our best seem, for a long time to come, less and less likely to evoke a responsive chord in the world's other great power." (!!!)

I have dealt at such length with Kraft's tendentious diatribe on Soviet culture (which, incidentally, in tune with the spirit in which it is written is captioned "Red Square Calls the Tune") because it is typical of what has gone for "assessment" of cultural life in the Soviet Union. The need to dispel these distortions, which not only serve to maintain cold war barriers between our two

countries but, above all, deprive our own people of the great Soviet cultural achievements, was one of the prime factors that led me to describe the real state of cultural affairs in the first land of socialism.

### Broadway in Crisis

It is not my intention to compare the theaters in the two countries. I leave that to the reader. However, while making my study of Soviet theater, I came across an article by the *New York Times* drama critic, Walter Kerr, in the *Times* magazine (June 3, 1973). Kerr's piece entitled "Can Broadway Move?" sounded a note of alarm on the status of the New York theater district. Theater in the U.S., particularly today, is far more than Broadway, and it is not my intention to cite Kerr's article as a description of the state of theaters in our country. But in light of what I have said concerning Soviet theater, I believe Kerr's remarks give food for thought. Kerr, who has been reviewing plays on Broadway for about 18 of his 21 years as critic, opens his pessimistic survey by characterizing Broadway as a "ghost town". He gives these statistics cited by *Variety*, the show business weekly, to back up his portrayal of Broadway's demise: "There are four fewer plays running than at this time last year, the shows that are running played 175 fewer weeks, and the total income of those running is now \$8 million behind the not particularly glorious income of yesteryear." But that hardly completes the sad picture. Kerr notes with alarm, that even "hits", which received unanimous or near-unanimous rave reviews, failed to play to capacity crowds more than a few weeks. He moans: "The old rush to the box office that used to follow rave notices and exhaust the supply of tickets for months and months ahead isn't there." Kerr points out that while musicals fare better than serious plays, even they have been hit hard. But it is when Kerr begins to probe the causes of

Broadway's decline that he is most revealing about his own thinking as well as the state of affairs on Broadway and, even more so, in New York City itself. He starts with the old cry of crisis in the theater itself (which, strangely enough, doesn't seem to affect Soviet theater). Thus, Kerr exclaims: "Who would pretend that drama, as a form, is in the ascendancy or even mildly healthy? It isn't, at the moment, 'our thing'. Perhaps films are, or rock concert or television. American society does not look to the theater as its defining mirror just now, does not naturally turn toward the stage when it wished to see itself accounted for, diagnosed, illuminated." Kerr lays the blame on "our society", which rejects drama because "of all the time-space arts, drama is the one that digs deepest". Continuing on this point, Kerr notes that "drama stands still, puts a spade to the earth and works downward until—at its best—it hits rock bottom". This is an apt definition of the role of drama. But "our society", Kerr continues, "would not seem at the moment to care much about rock bottom". And he adds disdainfully: "It hasn't been eager to inquire about what lies two inches under." This only shows how little Kerr, who has glued himself to Broadway a good part of his life as a critic, knows about "our society" and, more particularly, about the mass of the people who compose it and what they want from "our society", including our theater. The truth is that never in the history of our country have so many Americans DUG SO DEEPLY INTO "OUR SOCIETY", QUESTIONED IT, ITS INSTITUTIONS, ITS PRESIDENTS, ITS VALUES. The unprecedented movement against the war in Vietnam, the upsurges in the Black ghettos, Wounded Knee and Watergate,—all demonstrate this. And one of the reasons (aside from others) that they do not flock to Broadway (which Kerr should know) is that Broadway, with rare exceptions, is hardly the forum for such deep probing. Broadway's commercialism, box-office values (and high ticket prices—aside from specula-

tor's charges) as well as the character of its plays, restrict its audience considerably—to largely middle class and tired businessmen. Kerr evidently accepts as a normal state of affairs that the mass of working people are not theater-goers. It is true that at the present stage in "our society" most workers are not attracted to the theater. But this was even more the case with pre-revolutionary Russia. The real cultural revolution, as I have pointed out, is reflected in part by the fact that the theater doors have been thrown wide open to the Soviet people, and given the opportunity and the all-round cultural development of 50 years of socialist society, the people, including workers and collective farmers, have poured in. Kerr must know that even when the American people were given half a chance to become acquainted with the stage—as during the days of Federal Theater—they not only found it to their liking but fought hard to prevent the dismantling of the first semblance of a people's theater. And Joseph Papp, dynamic and popular director, demonstrated this anew, though on a far more limited scale, by his Theater in the Park (Central Park). Off Broadway and Off-Off Broadway, which came into existence in a revolt against Broadway, notwithstanding its serious weaknesses, (above all that it is not oriented toward a workers' audience) reflects a search for a people's theater. This is the case with many university-based theaters and, above all, with the Black theater groups which reflect the beginnings of a renaissance nurtured by the Black liberation movement. Kerr himself admits he is passing "the creative buck, the PROFUNDITY buck from the theater to the public at large" and begs off, "I think we'd best acknowledge the situation as a situation that exists and pass on."

Kerr then comes to the most damning explanation for Broadway's demise, one that is linked with and dramatically reflects not only the crisis in Broadway but the CRISIS OF OUR CITIES. Surveys, Kerr notes, have



revealed that audiences prefer matinees. More seem to come to the day-time performances and skip the ghostlier nights. "What makes those nights so ghostly?" Kerr asks and he provides the answer by giving a synopsis of the opening sequences of the musical hit "Seesaw". "A man trying to make a telephone call from a street booth is surrounded by prostitutes; once he's made the call, he's mugged". Kerr points out the degeneration of New York's theater district, Times Square, the heart of New York, which all New Yorkers and visitors to the city are all too painfully familiar with. "The area has grown shabby, the area has grown dangerous. All those hookers, all those porno houses and massage parlors (house of prostitution and homosexual relations—*M.D.*), all those junkies needing cash." But Kerr comes closer to the truth (which he is either blind to or shies away from) when he adds: "Those who would defend midtown suggest that people aren't so much afraid of being robbed on 46th Street as they are afraid of going home to 76th or 94th Streets afterwards. They don't want to go out at night in New York City AT ALL." A similar situation, he points out, exists in respect to Chicago and "other central cities". Most pathetic of all—and reflecting the bankruptcy of Kerr and other who fail to truly "dig deep" is Kerr's "solution". Broadway should move, Kerr declares. Where? Here's about as definite as he gets: Broadway should sniff the "air, scenting enthusiasm's possible neighborhood, locating whatever new center looks like becoming the vital center AND GETTING IN ON IT WHILE THE GETTING IS GOOD". (My emphasis—*M.D.*) Kerr not only reflects desperation about Broadway's state, but an implied realization that the decay eating away at our cities can catch up with the "vital center". And here lies the crux of the problem and the bankruptcy of Kerr's position. (He himself hardly takes it too seriously since he says he'd need a "magic wand and \$400 million" to move Broadway to a "vital-center".) Broadway not too

long ago was the "VITAL CENTER" of New York City. Nothing more forcefully symbolizes the decay of New York City and the crisis of our cities than what has happened to Broadway and the Times Square area, the "Vital Center". It is pervasive, corroding decay that is hardly limited to a specific area. It is a decay in the midst of "vital centers" plush \$100-\$150 and more a room apartment houses, swanky restaurants and night clubs and luxurious stores. Soviet theaters face their problems, as I have pointed out, but they in no way resemble those cited by Kerr. Least of all are Soviet theater-goers inhibited from attending performances because of "fear". Perhaps nothing so impresses U.S. visitors as the absence of fear in walking the streets of Soviet cities any hours of the night as well as day.

## A Cultural "Meeting on the Elbe" Points the Way

Soviet dramatists, actors, directors and just plain lovers of the theater have long expressed great respect for the U.S. stage and a deep desire to establish closer relations with their colleagues. And from what I observed when U.S. actors and directors visited the Soviet Union, this feeling was reciprocated on their part. The mutual benefit that can result from a more intimate relationship between our two theaters was, perhaps, best demonstrated during the Washington Arena Stage Theater's visit to Moscow and Leningrad in October 1973. It was my good fortune not only to see the splendid performances of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town", and "Inherit the Wind" by Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee in Moscow, but to witness the sincere rapport and warm friendships that grew up in the course of a few days between Soviet and American theater people.

This was particularly revealed at an unforgettable party for the Arena Stage group given by the Sovremennik at its theater on October 7, after both were through with their evening's performance. The get-together, which took place just after Brezhnev's successful visit to the U.S., and the markedly improved relations between the two

countries that followed in the wake of the second Summit Meeting exuded the spirit of a 1973 cultural meeting on the Elbe. I spoke to many of the Arena Stage actors and actresses and they had one word to describe their feeling—"unforgettable". As for the Sovremennik actors and the many other outstanding celebrities of the Soviet stage who were present, they opened their hearts to their U.S. friends in true Russian-Soviet style. The tone was set by Oleg Tabakov of the Sovremennik in his opening toast. In essence this is what he said: "We are not welcoming you as diplomats, but as ordinary Soviet people, as your colleagues. Ours is an universal stage and a common tongue. People of the theater understand each other regardless of language. We welcome you to our theater, to Moscow and the Soviet Union with all our hearts. May this be just a beginning and may it go on and on." Then with a grin on his boyish face, Tabakov added dryly: "We are patient people and we hope within a reasonable period of ten years or so we will be your guests in Washington." The Arena bunch howled and several actors interrupted Tabakov to shout: "No, no, you'll be our guests long before that." From then on the invitations and pledges of friendship between individual members of both theaters were unrestrained. The Sovremennik followed Tabakov's warm and witty remarks with a delightful and hilarious take-off on "Our Town". The parody presented in the style of what the Russians call "kapoostnik" (a "cabbage party", or spontaneous improvisation) was written and casually rehearsed the same day by a group of Sovremennik's actors and actresses. It had the Arena cast in stitches. Then both sides stopped being performers and acted like people who took great pleasure in getting to know each other. There were some 200-300 present, but the evening had the intimate atmosphere of a house party. They danced each other's dances and sang each other's songs and talked. Language was no barrier—the warm feelings were better expressed on



each other's faces. It was a little English here, a dash of Russian there, and a lot of pantomime everywhere (though Alan Schneider, director, and Zelda Fichandler, the producing director of the Arena Stage Theater, both made use of their talking knowledge of the language).

The Washington Arena Stage Theater produced a profound impact on the theater world of Moscow. From the point of view of theater and the choice of plays it was, indeed, a case of putting one of our best foot forward (though, I believe, to really make it our best foot, a vital group that is effectively dealing with our sharpest contemporary problems, such as the Negro Ensemble Theater, should follow).

I closely watched the Moscow audience's reaction to Arena Stage's presentation of "Our Town". It was transfixed and deeply moved by the universal humanity of Wilder's play. I believe the play was so deeply felt because Wilder's simple but profound philosophy of life was very close to the all-encompassing humanity of the classic Russian and contemporary Soviet writers. It was at home with Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Gorky as well as Sholokhov, Simonov, Rozov, Vampilov, Volodin and Roshchin. "Our Towns'" unashamed deep feelings for people, its hymn to their little joys that live with them forever, its painful recognition of the tragedy of the human condition, man's knowledge of his mortality, did, indeed, bring Grovers Corners to Moscow. And what brought the play and the players even closer to the Moscow audience was that the founder of the Moscow Art Theater and one of the founders of Russian Theater itself, the beloved Stanislavsky had come along with this U.S. theater. As one Soviet actress told me, "I was surprised to hear the cast speaking English". It was a demonstration of Stanislavsky's profound influence on our stage. It was a most forceful plea for closer contact between our two theaters which in a basic sense have so much in common. A similar, though, in my opinion, not quite as deep

an impact was registered by "Inherit the Wind". The reason lay essentially in the difference between a play which has become a classic and a very good play. In a way, both plays complemented each other, in presenting various aspects of small town life in an America that existed before or in the early years of the October Revolution. And that is how it was generally reviewed by Victor Komissarzhevsky in *Pravda*.

The visit further whetted the appetite of Soviet directors and actors for works on contemporary problems of life in the U.S. And in the informal discussion they literally picked the brains of their American colleagues on this subject and begged them to send scripts by promising playwrights. On the other hand, though they had little time to really get acquainted with the Soviet theater, Arena Stage actors and actresses I talked to were quite impressed with what they were able to see. This was, particularly, the case with the Sovremennik's staging of Shatrov's "Bolsheviks", which I reviewed earlier. Notwithstanding the language problem, their knowledge of the stage, as well as a prior summary of the contents of the play, made it possible for them, the American visitors, to fully understand and appreciate the play. And they loved "Bolsheviks". Considering the half-century caricature, which portrayed the leaders of the Great October Revolution as blood-thirsty fanatics, that in itself speaks a lot for the honest cultural exchange now possible. And as only craftsmen, who themselves know the skill and art which goes into the making of the magic of the stage, Arena actors were extremely impressed with the Sovremennik's stagecraft. "What art and skill it takes to bring the feel of the Russian Revolution in all its turbulence and complexities, as well as its exhilarating spirit, on that small stage!" one of the American actresses told me. And you could see she wanted to learn much more of what it took to produce such "art and skill". This is true, as I have noticed, for an increasing number of American theater

people. Many are finding that they cannot avoid making comparisons between the social atmosphere surrounding the theater and the state assistance given to it in the Soviet Union and the quite different situation in our country. Thus, for example, Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee, who visited the Soviet Union and had a good opportunity to see Soviet theater in action as well as to talk to many outstanding Soviet theater people, had a difficult time to explain why the U.S. had very few permanent acting companies. Glenn M. Loney in an article in *Theater Design and Technology* (No 33, May, 1973), published by the U.S. Institute For Theater Technology, quotes Lawrence as saying: "The conditions under which Americans, especially Broadway theater, operates were unbelievable to the Russians." (Page 13.) And Lawrence explains: "They cannot understand that we have VIRTUALLY NO CONTINUITY IN THEATER COMPANIES, that each Broadway show is a new ensemble constantly changing—and that it will never be reconvened to do a new play. To them, THAT IS AS IF THE FORD MOTOR COMPANY RECONSTITUTED ITSELF EVERY TIME A NEW FORD COMES OFF THE ASSEMBLY LINE" (my emphasis—*M.D.*) (page 16). One would, indeed, be hard put to come up with a more apt summary of the unstable and precarious existence led by the theater in our "free enterprise" society. The wonder isn't that Soviet people find this hard to understand, but that we have come to accept this condition as a NORMAL state of affairs.

Loney goes on to add by way of explanation: "But then there is so much difference between the two theater cultures. Jerome Lawrence notes with some chauvinistic chagrin that there are 600 professional theaters in the Soviet Union PLAYING CONSTANTLY. This figure, of course, does not include the many, many amateur stages at factories, universities, schools and in communities. In the 23 days set aside for Lawrence and Lee to

see productions, during a month-long visit, they managed to squeeze in 27 different plays. In Moscow, they counted some 25 theaters; in Leningrad about 16."

Loney continues his detailing of the discoveries of Lawrence and Lee: "And each theater, as Lawrence notes, has 80-700 actors on ANNUAL SALARY, six or more stage directors, designers, playwrights in residence, technicians, craftsmen, workers, ushers, secretaries and the like." The reader is, of course, already familiar with these facts but, frankly, I quoted at length from this article dealing with the observations by Lawrence and Lee because they demonstrate the normal envious reaction of any honest person who is familiar with our own sad state of theater affairs. Lawrence punctures the myth of the conservatism of Soviet theater. Loney quotes him as saying: "By and large, the classics are done with a loving tradition. BUT THE MODERN THINGS LOOK AS UP-TO-DATE AS ANY THING TOM O'HORGAN IS DOING IN NEW YORK! At the Taganka in Moscow and the Theater for Young Spectators in Leningrad, we saw some things which were truly wild and far out." (My emphasis—*M.D.*) And Lawrence adds: "Some of Taganka's technical people really should pay us a visit to show us what they do and how they do it." But Loney points out that Lawrence and Lee's praise was hardly limited to the Taganka (as is often the case with some who never take the trouble to know Soviet theater). Loney states that "the technical work of many Soviet theaters they visited impressed the team. Visiting the great central scenic shop in Moscow, which builds sets for a number of theaters, they were amazed to find an archive containing sketches, drawings and photos of every Russian production. All are given a permanent record. Their work is financed by the profits from the operation of the scenic-building facility." In the same issue of the magazine (page 19) Vitaly Yankovsky, U.S. scenographer, adds his bit to the discoveries about Soviet theater. Yankovsky



points out that, according to UNESCO data, the Soviet Union has "about a quarter of all the theaters of the world". He notes that "during the years of Soviet power, 355 theaters have been either built anew or reconstructed" and that fifty more new theaters will be built or reconstructed during 1971-75 period. Unfortunately, these facts concerning Soviet theater (and cultural life) hardly reach the mass of the American people. The Journal of the U.S. Institute for Theater only reaches its limited readership. Our commercial press, as is known, provides quite a different picture of Soviet cultural life.

If the article reports him accurately, Lee came up with a disappointing explanation of the difference in the state of affairs in the theaters in the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. Loney states: "Looking for an explanation of the popularity of theater in Russia, as opposed to the relative lack of interest in the U.S., Lee says: 'They are hungry for theater in the Soviet Union. I think it's because their T.V. is lousier than ours.'" If Lee watched Soviet T.V. for any length of time he would know that the Soviet viewer has a regular front seat at many of the best plays of all the Soviet theaters Lee praises so highly. Thus, actually, one can add tens of millions to the Soviet theater audience. Lee would also know that ballets and operas of the famed Bolshoi, Kirov, Odessa companies, gala concerts by an array of world artists that would bankrupt our biggest impresarios are regularly broadcast in FULL without any COMMERCIAL BREAKS. In fact, Soviet T.V. is one of the most powerful media for making the Soviet Union the most culturally advanced country (on a mass scale) that it is. Lee must know that our big-business controlled T.V., saturated with commercialism and gory sensationalism, hardly plays a similar role. It's not only that Soviet people are hungry for theater. (One may well ask: how was that hunger aroused and cultivated on such a mass scale?) It's that socialist society is satisfying that hunger and keeping pace with the Soviet people's

greatly expanding appetite, as Lee's own statistics reveal.

The contrasting situation in our own country is painful to us Americans as it must be for Lee. And Lee performs a valuable service in his honest and hard-hitting reporting of the Soviet theater scene. Unfortunately, this truthful picture has been largely concealed from most Americans. The dissemination of distorted and slanderous information on the state of affairs of Soviet culture has been a particular concentration of "Sovietologists". They have exploited the ignorance that exists on this vital sphere of Soviet life. If five years of living in the Soviet Union have fortified any conviction in me it is that BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN OUR TWO COUNTRIES LIES IN OPENING WIDE THE CHANNELS OF UNDERSTANDING OF A WAY OF LIFE THAT HAS PRODUCED SUCH A GREAT CULTURAL REVOLUTION. I frankly stress OUR need to open wide such channels. Much, of course, has to be done on the Soviet side to gain a deeper understanding of American life.

But as one who has lived in the two worlds, I can say that there is no comparison between our ignorance of Soviet theater, Soviet culture, Soviet life, and the corresponding lack of knowledge existing among Soviet people. This is not a matter of conjecture. As I noted earlier, there is no comparison between the number of U.S. plays being performed this very moment in the Soviet Union and the number of contemporary Soviet plays being staged in our country. There is no comparison between the number of U.S. writers, classic as well as contemporary, who are published in editions far exceeding ours and are as familiar to Soviet readers as to Americans, and our own treatment of the works of Soviet writers (except those who turn anti-Soviet). Indeed, I would guess, Hemingway is perhaps more widely read and appreciated in the Soviet Union than in our own country. As for misconceptions that exist among Soviet people, especially Soviet youth, on life in the U.S. (and they exist in greater

measure than I had anticipated), they hardly lie in what our press portrays as a one-sided negative picture. From my own experience, a good deal of the misconceptions (illusions is a better word to describe them) lies in that the full decay of "free enterprise" life, the crisis of our great cities, the moral degeneration that has produced Song Mys, Watergate, the decade of assassinations and murders, racism, cities of fear, mass addiction to narcotics are hard to understand for many who never in their lives experienced the "blessings" of exploitation. The weaknesses of Soviet writers and journalists are not at all what our propaganda machine makes them out to be—presenting a one-sided dark picture of life in capitalist U.S. It is that they have not yet succeeded in making U.S. "free enterprise" a reality, fully real to the Soviet people. From what I have observed, they are faced with a difficult task: how to convey to Soviet citizens the sense and smell of the decay that grips all phases of U.S. life. And even if one grants that the negative aspects of U.S. life today have been stressed in the Soviet Union, I doubt whether the Soviet press exceeds our own in portraying the decay that is corroding all aspects of life in our country. In the present period of improving U.S.-U.S.S.R. relations the Soviet press is far more restrained in dealing with negative developments in our country than is our uninhibited commercial press in respect to Soviet internal affairs. This, notwithstanding the fact that no one is more responsible for the warped picture of Soviet life existing among the majority of Americans than our press. But, detente or no detente, our big business press continues its endless variations on one and the same theme (ever since the Great October Revolution): the "suppression" of the rights of the individual, the "persecution" of intellectuals, the "regimenting" of culture. Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn vie with "harassment" of Soviet Jews for the choice spots in news of the Soviet Union. The contradiction between this distorted image of

Soviet life and the reality which objective Americans (including our performing artists, actors and actresses) meet when they come to the Soviet Union is glaring indeed. I am convinced that, in the final analysis, this Soviet reality, that is steadily looming in stature, is the rock on which the half-century old anti-Sovietism will be crushed.

It is not an easy thing to erase the distorted images of long standing, especially when a vast propaganda machine is dedicated to keeping them alive. But, from what I observed, with every contact with Soviet reality, more and more of this is being rubbed off. I recall how, as we were bidding each other goodbye, after the "unforgettable" second "meeting on the Elbe" at the Sovremennik, one of the actors of the Washington Arena Stage Theater exclaimed: "This was the best evening of my life. And what a wonderful people!" Then his face clouded momentarily: "What about the Soviet Jews?" The question was asked more as a plea for an explanation of the contradiction between the reality he was experiencing and the distorted image he came with than as an accusation. What made that contradiction all the more glaring was that present at this Sovremennik-Arena Stage get-together were many Soviet Jews who are among the most prominent in the Soviet theater world. An honest, objective, close relationship between Soviet and U.S. theaters can do much to dispel the tenacious influences of cold war thinking and can lead to a deeper understanding of our two countries, our two worlds. The reasons for this lie in the very nature of the theater as a probing reflector of society which not only honestly raises and deals with problems but does so in terms of real human beings. Walter Kerr's definition of the distinctive role of theater in society (mentioned earlier) was, indeed, a profound one, though his cynical disdain for the consciousness of the American people was as superficial as it was incorrect. Theater "of all the time-space arts" does, indeed, "dig



deepest", does, indeed, "put a spade to the earth" until it "hits rock bottom". There is no subject on which the American people need more to "hit rock bottom" than on a real, honest understanding of Soviet life. They owe this understanding not so much to the Soviet people as to themselves. Never has such an understanding been more urgently needed by us, for never in our history have Americans been in such fervent search for a better way of life, for a life without Vietnams and Watergates, without cities of crisis, without cities of fear, without all-pervading racism, without the crisis in living that has, indeed, made life in our country more difficult than ever in our history for growing numbers of Americans. Soviet theater in this respect has something special to offer. It is a virtual treasure house of portrayals of generations of Soviet people who transformed the world as they have themselves and who have far from given up the effort to perfect their world and themselves. On the contrary, they are now engaged in the climactic phases of this struggle to change the world and themselves which they have been involved in for more than half a century. In many respects, this phase—the construction of the material basis of communist society and the molding of communist man and woman—is truly the most exciting one. It was to provide the reader with a living picture of this process as it is dramatically reflected on the dynamic Soviet stage that I dealt in considerable detail with a number of Soviet plays. It was not the aim of this book to provide more than an introduction to a theater which, like no other in the world, has brought to its multinational stage the heritages of world and Russian classical drama and has considerably enriched the world of drama during the past half century. It is the aim of this book to introduce Americans to a new type of theater, from the box office to the stage.

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